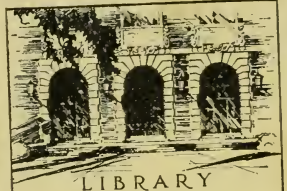

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CHAPTER XII.

OLD CYRUS CHANCE.

CYRUS CHANCE was the millionaire of the Leura. No one knew how rich he was. He had cattle and sheep stations scattered over three colonies; he had a share in a gold-mine; he had sugar plantations up North and flour-mills down South; he was said to own a great meat-freezing establishment, and to have investments in Fiji and the South Sea Islands. There were all sorts of stories afloat about his great wealth and his eccentric ways. No doubt both were exaggerated, but there was no doubt that he might, had he chosen, have been a social and financial power in any great capital. He might have lapped himself

in luxury, might have drunk the beverages of emperors, and feasted at banquets that would have satisfied the epicures of an older civilization. He might have bought the love of women, as he might have bought anything else that pleased him. He might have satiated himself with all the material pleasures of existence had he so willed. But he did none of these things—would not have known how to set about doing them. He lived like a miser: fed on stockman's most frugal fare, wore the shabbiest clothes, and appeared to revel in personal hardship. He avoided even Bush society, and for that reason preferred to bury himself on the Leura for the greater part of the year, managing his station there, and having the name of driving a harder bargain than any squatter round. It was told of him, though upon what authority rumour said not, that he had never in his life tasted wine or spirits, smoked tobacco, nor kissed a woman except his mother. There was only one woman, it seemed, from whom he did not fly, and that was Mrs. Tregaskiss.

He spent an hour or two occasionally at

Mount Wombo, and talked to her all the time. He never came of set purpose, but made an excuse to halt on his way to and from Port Victoria. If it ever chanced that he had to stay a night he camped out. That was another of his peculiarities. He would not sleep under the roof or eat the food of a man whom he disliked; and he cordially disliked Keith Tregaskiss. This might be inferred from the fact that he usually timed his visits when the master of Mount Wombo was absent.

When Mrs. Tregaskiss and Cyrus Chance were left alone, she took him round by the front veranda to her little drawing-room, begging him to excuse her minding baby while the half-caste had dinner, and before she established herself on the sofa with her child, made Ning pull forward the most comfortable of the armchairs, and herself took his hat from him. Ning and old Cyrus Chance were great friends. He generally had some goodies in his pocket for her—cheap store-goodies, but none the less acceptable to Ning. She amused the old man with her queer gabble. He was well up in blacks'

phrases, and delighted when she answered him aptly.

'Nya ninda gulurdil' (You are my love), said the old man.

'Guiungun nyali' (We belong to one another), promptly returned Ning.

The old man's grimness relaxed; he seated himself, and looked round with a grunt of satisfaction.

'Now, I always say, Mistress Tregaskiss, that your sitting-room is just an example of what can be done with naught but taste and little cost. I can't make it out. At home, I'm all heat and glare and flies, and whatever I do there's not a chair that gives one a resting feel. And here, no matter how the sun blazes, it's always shady and comfortable, and there's not that abominable swarm of sticky insects buzzing round. And then there is just an armchair that nips one's back in the right place, and just a homey feel over everything. Yet I shouldn't say, now, that you'd spent a ten-pound note on the room—none of the Brinda Plains fal-lals and grandeur here. Lord! I abominate them, and that talking woman who wants to manage the

district! What is it, Mistress Tregaskiss, that makes the home? Is it the children, or is it you? It ain't the mon.'

'It's keeping the blinds down, Mr. Chance, and fly-papers for the insects about; and it's cushions of the wild ducks' feathers that I bribe the men to bring me, and it's flowers and photographs and all the rest. I've got a new photograph I want to show you—one that I found here when I came back, just done up and come by post, and not a word to tell me anything about the sender, except that I suppose from the dress her husband has died.'

Clare took a large Mendelssohn photograph from a table near. It gave the suggestion of a youthful but chastened and modern Mary Stuart, on account principally of the long, rich black robe, with hanging sleeves—no doubt the latest design in mourning tea-gowns—and a coif-like cap surmounting the crinkly, parted hair, which Clare had been some time in discovering was emblematic of matrimonial bereavement. The mixture of mediævalism and modernity, of suffering and frivolity, and of a certain coquetry, com-

bined with a certain spirituality, gave the picture a peculiar fascination.

Mr. Chance examined it carefully, holding it away from his eyes and then close to them, putting it down and taking it up again, as if he were loath to turn from it.

'That's a very curious face,' he said at last. 'I've never seen one in a picture like it. It makes me think of "Fair Ines."'

'"Fair Ines!"' Clare repeated in some surprise. She had not imagined that Mr. Chance would know anything about Hood's poem.

He repeated softly, with his uncultured intonation:

> '"Oh, saw you not Fair Ines?
> She's gone unto the West,
> To dazzle when the sun's gone down,
> And all the world at rest."'

And added, 'You'll think it queer, perhaps, Mistress Tregaskiss, that an old, stingy, deformed Bushman like me should have any romantic notions about heroines of novels and poetry?'

'I don't know,' Clare answered. 'I fancied

somehow that you didn't go in for much reading. I don't know why.'

'What else should you fancy? I've never had any education. I was a working lad that ran away from home, and I've toiled with the sweat of my brow for all I've got together. But I wull say, Mistress, that we Bushmen owe a debt of gratitude to the Chambers' firm for their spread of cheap literature. Where would I have been, to start with, if it hadn't been for "Chambers' Information for the People"?'

'And the heroines, Mr. Chance?'

'Not the ones in novels,' returned Chance decidedly. 'I never wanted naught to do with them; they were a poor, fainting, whimpering lot. It's the women in the bit songs, and lines of poetry, with a tune in them going straight to the heart, that fetched me, and "Fair Ines" was one of those. I read a sort of essay by a very clever man—though I doubt me he's misguided in his politics—in *Scribner's Magazine* the other day. It was called "Three Dream Heroines," and one was "Sally in our Alley"—the nice, honest, homely thing that I'd have found a

touch feckless and silly, I'm thinking—and another was "Annabel Lee," who died young, and I'm thinking, too, that if she had lived to keep house, the man mightn't have set such store by her. And then there was "Fair Ines," who don't come into the list of women at all, somehow. She's the dream queen of another world, and she's just the embodiment of all one ever dreamed and told nobody—a creature to be dazzled by, but not to be made afeard of—she's too kind, and gracious, and winsome for that—who'd ride along and smile and smile, and make the heart of man glad for no more than having looked upon her face. Not an angel. Oh no, Mistress Tregaskiss. I don't hold by angels—not in this world, anyhow. Salt junk is more satisfying than pickled saints. But just "Fair Ines."'

'And you've never seen a real "Fair Ines," Mr. Chance?'

'Well, Mistress Tregaskiss, you yourself are the nearest approach to "Fair Ines" I've come across yet; but "Fair Ines" wouldn't have married Keith Tregaskiss and settled down on the Leura.'

'Oh, how you understand me!' she cried, and impulsively put out her hand to him.

But the queer old man did not take it. He only leaned back in his chair, and looked at her with his blinking eyes and his odd smile, and then, without saying a word, deliberately took out a red bandana, folded it in four, and blew his nose with it so loudly that the baby gave a feeble cry.

Clare laughed outright—almost hysterically.

'I wonder,' she said presently, 'if you'll ever see Gladys?'

'Gladys?'

'That's the lady whose photograph I showed you; she was a friend of mine long before I was married. I have not seen her for eleven years. She married herself—an old man, who I suppose is dead, and Gladys is rich—and free.'

'I don't want to see her,' said Mr. Chance, 'if she married an old man for his money.'

'No, no,' put in Clare. 'You mustn't think hardly of my friend Gladys. I don't

believe she would have married him if she hadn't liked him for himself.'

Mr. Chance gave a grunt.

'I wouldn't cross a log to see a woman,' pursued Mr. Chance. 'Why, no, I rather think I'd swim a dozen creeks to get away from one.' He used his bandana again, more gently, and resumed his study of Clare's drawing-room. 'It didn't run to a ten-pound note, now, did it?' he said.

'I don't suppose it did. Keith papered the walls and made the little tables.'

'Did he, now?' There was a note of incredulity in the old man's voice. 'Well, I shouldn't have suspected he'd take that trouble for ye. It must have been a long time ago.'

'It was soon after we married,' Clare laughed again. 'The reason why we are so smart is because I brought some red cloth and some chintz from Port Victoria; and Mr. Shand helped me to furbish things up a bit.'

The old man gave her a nod of approbation.

'Well, you're a fine economical housewife,

Mistress Tregaskiss ; and it 'ud be a pleasure to a body to save for you. There's but poor joy to me in thinking of those that count on coming after me—my brother's children, with their airs and flash ways. I'm sorry you're not my kin.'

'I'm sorry, too, Mr. Chance.'

It did not seem to occur to the millionaire that want of kinship was not necessarily a bar to the desire which had dimly presented itself to his imagination.

There was a silence, during which he gazed at Clare, now occupied with the aroused infant.

'So that's the youngster?' said Cyrus Chance. 'What did you go and have it for? It's a mistake.'

'Yes, I think it is,' answered Clare gravely.

'What's the good of making another leg-rope to keep you bailed up in your pen here? That's what children are—naught but leg-ropes. Look at the Carmodys. He might strike out and say "Boo" to the Bank ; and she could go teaching or charing, or into a hospital, if it wasn't for those bairnies. Do

ye nurse the creature?' he added with abrupt directness.

'I did for a little while, but I'm not strong enough.'

Cyrus Chance gave a grunt.

'You're wrong, Mistress; it's an outlet. There's women's feelings that 'ull flow out in mother's milk and clear themselves; and that when they're kept corked are apt to go sour and sickly, and prove pernicious to the system. If you were my daughter—and thank the Lord I've not got a daughter—I'd say to you, "Nurse your babies and turn 'em into blessings more like than curses." Besides, mother's milk is soothing to heart-wounds, and has a sovereign virtue. I've found that out, for all that I am a bachelor and a woman-hater. D'ye think I'm an old fool now, Mistress Tregaskiss?'

'I think you are a very wise man,' said Clare, with a break in her voice; 'and you are very good to me.'

'Well, never mind. I've brought a present for you—thinking of the baby. It's in my pack outside, with the hominy for Ning. If ye'll permit me, I'll go and fetch it in.' He

stopped at the door, and addressed her solemnly: 'Look ye here, Mistress Tregaskiss. You'll have heard a lot of stories about old money-grubbing Cyrus Chance, and about his stinginess and his cranks, and some of these stories may be true, and some of them mayn't. But there's one tale you'll never have heard, and never will hear, for it 'ud just be looked upon as a miracle right through Australia. That is, that old Cyrus Chance, in the whole course of his natural existence, ever gave, or was likely to give, a present to a woman. There!'

He did not wait for her reply, but hobbled out, the inequality of his shape making his step uneven, and heightening the gnome-like expression his appearance somehow made.

Clare laughed on with a certain mournful amusement, inexpressibly touched the while, and wondering what his present might be. She remembered a story Mrs. Cusack had told her, of how she, being the secretary for a sort of *crèche* hospital for the children of emigrants out of work, had written to the rich man of the district, asking for a subscription. Mrs. Cusack had recited to her the

terse reply, which she now recollected word for word :

'MADAM,

'Yours of —— date received. *Re* Children's Hospital. Can imagine that emigrants' babies require nursing, but cannot imagine what concern that is of

'Yours faithfully,

'CYRUS CHANCE.'

She remembered, too, Mrs. Cusack's sequel to the story ; her relation of how, some little while afterwards, an envelope containing ten ten-pound notes had been received by the secretary of the institution, and generally ascribed to the repentant generosity of Cyrus Chance, though an unfortunate clergyman, who, when halting for the night at his Leura station, had ventured to thank the miser millionaire, had been then and there packed out of the house for impertinence, and bidden take himself to the huts.

'It was exactly like him,' Clare was saying to herself when the old man appeared again with three fat black bottles, red labelled,

under each arm, and a small bag of hominy in one hand. He laid the bottles solemnly one by one down by the sofa.

'That's the best bottled stout, Mistress, to be had on the Leura, and I beg you'll do me the favour to take a glass when you feel low. Ye'll not require it so much, perhaps, as you're not nursing, and if you cork the bottle tight and turn it upside down, the stuff 'ull keep.'

She thanked him. He was not content till he had seen her put the bottles away in her store cupboard in the dining-room.

She heard afterwards that he had gone round by Brinda Plains for the purpose of buying them at the Cusack store, and had haggled for a quarter of an hour over the price.

Having done his errand, Mr. Chance prepared to depart. The bellowing of beasts and cracking of stock whips were heard afar off in the plain, and their owner could not resist leading Mrs. Tregaskiss to the veranda —whence, through one of the gidia clearings, she could see the heaving mass of cattle as it passed—and descanting upon the economical

management of his droving operations, and the sinful waste of Leura squatters in general, who employed twice as many hands as were needed, and did not dodge about and surprise their travelling stock, as he himself was in the habit of doing. 'Keeps 'em from taking a night on the "burst." What's the meaning of so many mobs breaking in the "Grave" Pocket?' he said. 'It isn't the 'possums, and it isn't the scrubbers; it's the grog shanty, ten miles off, that does it; and my men know I'm as likely as not to turn up the night they're camped there, and I shan't have to go to the grog shanty to look after them. They don't suspect I'm here to-day. Came across country on purpose. Camped out last night at an old sheep station and saved hotel expenses, and got supper out of Cusack for nothing off the pumpkins agen the sheep-yard. Many's the time I've camped outside a field of Indian corn and made my meal from green cobs. That's the way to save money and to make money, Mistress Tregaskiss. It's the pence and not the pounds that does it. There's always truth in old saws.'

She went out with him to the yard, and saw him re-strap his valise, a good deal thinner now that the bottles had been taken out of it. He showed her how he had wrapped them in his flannel shirts to keep them from breaking. 'It's good stuff, Mistress Tregaskiss; now mind ye take a sup when ye're low,' was his parting admonition, and he rode off as proud and pleased with his generosity as though he had handed her the bank acquittance of Tregaskiss' debt—'which, indeed, he might have done,' she thought whimsically to herself, 'with less inconvenience than the buying of those six bottles had cost him.'

Two men of disagreeable aspect, whom she had not before noticed, were loitering about the fence. They were on foot, and explained that they had left their horses with a black-boy, were bound to Port Victoria, and wanted to buy rations. The elder, and evidently the more important of the two, was a rakish, determined-looking person, dressed like a stockman in dirty Crimean shirt and riding breeches, and yet, Clare felt sure, not a stockman. He did not speak uncivilly, but

there was something furtive in his expression, and she did not like the way his eyes wandered about as if he were taking stock of everything. She wished that Keith or Mr. Shand were at home, or that she had kept Cyrus Chance a little longer.

'I am sorry,' she said, in answer to the man's request for rations, 'but we are short of flour ourselves, our drays having been delayed. Mr. Tregaskiss is not at home, and I could not let you have any during his absence.'

'Oh, the drays have been delayed!' repeated the elder man, exchanging a glance, which Clare did not like either, with his companion. 'But I suppose you are not short of meat, ma'am, and that you can let us have a ration of junk? We've got money to pay for it.'

'I can let you have some meat,' she answered. 'Wait till I get the key of the store.'

She went into the kitchen and called Ah Sin to come and weigh the meat for her, but Ah Sin had chosen the opportunity to pay a visit to his brother Chinaman at the garden

by the lagoon, and 'Gusta, as usual, was nowhere to be found. Clare delayed indoors a little while, hoping that somebody might come back, but no one came, and when she went out again the men looked impatient and angry. They came to meet her at the veranda.

'I believe you've got plenty of tobacco in the store,' the elder man said, with a touch of insolence in his tone. 'We should be glad of a fig or two.'

'I'm not sure.'

Clare began to feel frightened of the men and wondered if they could be strikers or perhaps bushrangers—though these were not as yet known on the Leura—and what she should do if they threatened her. How had they found out there was tobacco in the store? As a matter of fact there was enough of everything, except flour and sugar. She was a courageous woman and not inclined to knuckle under, but she was quite aware that to refuse rations in the Bush without valid reason was to go against all the Australian conventions of hospitality. On the whole, she thought it would be wisest to assume

that the men were well-disposed, and to give them what they wanted.

'I can let you have some tobacco,' she answered, walking across the yard with a dignity which had its effect upon the man, for he made way for her, and changed from his aggressive manner. She unlocked a door near the kitchen, which had a great rusty padlock, and entered a dim, raftered room, where a tarantula wove his web in a corner, and cockroaches crawled out from the crevices—the usual Bush store: cobwebby shelves stacked with groceries, clothing for men, blankets and saddle-lining, drums of tobacco, kegs of rum, a bottle or two of Stevens' Red Blister, Farmer's Friend, and so on; the usual rough dresser and scales; the great bin for flour, which Mr. Shand had left open, and where the weevils made black spots upon the caked flour in the corner of the lid; and another bin, with compartments for the moist, black, ration sugar, and for a lighter and better sort. On a sort of daïs, which, after the arrival of drays, would be piled with bags of flour, there was nothing now but empty sacks, folded.

Clare separated and weighed some figs of tobacco, which she handed to the men, also a bottle of pickles for which they asked. Then she took them to the meat store—another low, dark room, with wire netting stretched across the narrow window, an earthen floor, dripping hides nailed against the walls, two large casks of brine, in which the meat was kept, heaps of coarse salt lying about, and pieces of more freshly-salted beef stacked upon the long wooden board on which the salting was done. Clare poked out a piece of beef from one of the casks and hooked it on the rusty steelyard, carefully adjusting the balance.

It was a curious occupation for a woman so beautiful and so refined—for the admired Miss Gardyne, of London days gone by. The men slouched against the door watching her, and perhaps something of this sort flashed through their minds. One of them, at any rate, asked respectfully if he could not help her. She let him take the piece of beef off the steelyard, and it was just then that a horse's hoofs sounded, and she had a vision of someone hastily dismounting—a gentleman

whom she supposed to be her husband or Mr. Shand returned from the Bore.

But it was the voice of neither of these that bade the kangaroo dogs lie down, and called out to one of the strangers, before addressing Mrs. Tregaskiss :

'Kelso, what are you doing here ?'

The man sulkily turned and made a gesture of recognition.

'No harm, Dr. Geneste; and I don't see, any way, that it's your business. The meat's eight pounds all but one ounce, Mrs. Tregaskiss, and there's the money for it, and for the pickles and tobacco.'

He laid a little heap of silver and copper coins beside the steelyard.

'Stop a moment,' said Geneste. 'I think that money can go back into your pouch, and the meat into the cask again. Mrs. Tregaskiss, allow me to settle this for you.' He lifted his hat as he came to the meat-store door. 'These men are strike delegates, and I'm sure your husband wouldn't be pleased at your serving them with rations. Do you go in. Kelso and I have had dealings together before, and I've got a word to say

to him now. Stand back, sir, and let the lady pass.'

Kelso obeyed with a cowed air.

Clare was only too glad to do what he told her. He held the door for her to go through, flung the money back to the strikers, and afterwards closed the door, shutting in the piece of beef, and the tobacco and pickles, which had been standing on the dresser. He turned the key in the padlock, and then walked with Mrs. Tregaskiss across the yard, keeping his hat in his hand with an exaggerated deference that touched her to the quick. She knew that he had taken in the whole picture of the squalid little place, and of herself standing by the steelyard selling meat to these horrible men. It seemed her fate that he should discover her in humiliating positions, though in truth there was nothing wonderful in his appearing at that critical moment. His visit had been in contemplation, and was expected day by day, and this was the natural hour for him to arrive at the station. Bush travellers always time themselves to reach their destination at sundown.

'I believe these men are scouts,' he said. 'Kelso is a bad lot, and at the root of all these labour troubles. I've no doubt he knew that Tregaskiss was out of the way, and I only wonder he wasn't insolent. I'll pack him off.'

But the men were out of the yard when he turned back to the meat-store. Kelso had not waited for an encounter with the explorer. Geneste, old Bushman as he was, unstrapped his valise, took the saddle from his horse, and washed its back before turning it out. There was not a black-boy to be seen. Only Ah Sin in his white frock was visible, half-way down to the lagoon, his arms full of green stuff.

'I'm glad she has vegetables, at any rate,' thought Geneste. 'My Heaven! what a place for such a woman to call home!'

CHAPTER XIII.

BLANCHARD'S ROMANCE.

The sun had set in the midst of a thick storm-cloud—those clouds, alas! which did not bring the much-needed rain, and were indeed, as Tregaskiss had said, the sure sign of continued drought. The air was hot and heavy, and insects swarmed in myriads. When 'Gusta brought in a smoking dish of corned beef, and summoned the party from the veranda to dinner, Clare moved the lamp to the side-table so that they might be able to eat without the risk of winged and crawling things dropping into their plates.

Tregaskiss and Shand had returned from the Bore, having fallen in with Mr. Blanchard on the way. He was sent over from Brinda Plains with a message from Mr. Cusack—a

warning that the Union men were out, that there was a rumour of a wool-shed having been burned down belonging to a sheepowner beyond Ilganda, and an intimation from the authorities that each squatter would be expected to keep arms, horses, and men in readiness for the protection of the district, in case of a general riot. It was evident that Mr. Cusack, bully and blusterer as he was, had got into what Blanchard, in his soft voice and deliberate English intonation, called a blue funk. Tregaskiss laughed and made light of danger—to be sure he was not a sheepowner and had less to fear, but Clare rejoiced in the reflection that, at any rate, physically speaking, he was not a coward. She thought of her whimsical fancy under the stars, of a Berserker past. The fighting blood rose in him when he heard of the Kelso episode of the afternoon. He was infuriate at the notion that the labour delegates had escaped, and was half inclined to rise up, pursue, and smite them.

'What could you do?' said Geneste quietly. 'They only wanted to buy rations—ostensibly. You can't put them in chains for that.'

'It's infernally unpleasant to have the brutes skulking round,' said Tregaskiss with his rough free-spokenness.

'Extremely unpleasant for your wife,' returned Geneste, his eyes following Clare as she moved about the dining-room. 'She might have been in an awkward position this afternoon if Kelso had shown impertinence,' he went on. 'Excuse my saying, Tregaskiss, but in these unsettled times I think she ought not to be left without a man on the place.'

'There were Ah Sin and Li Hong.'

'Oh, Chinamen!' Geneste's shrug was eloquent.

'Well, come in to dinner,' said Tregaskiss. He hurried to the store-cupboard, returning presently with a bottle of whisky and one of Cyrus Chance's bottles of porter. He asked his wife where the porter had come from, and laughed immoderately, calling in the others to hear, as Clare reluctantly told how Mr. Chance had made her a present. Cyrus Chance, the miser, making anyone a present! The idea was too comical. Mr. Blanchard supplemented her version by

an account of old Cyrus's visit to the Brinda store. Tregaskiss jeered at the old man's meanness. Had it been a case of port wine, he said, the gift might have been worth a fuss. Clare winced at the various remarks. Even Dr. Geneste, to her fancy, struck a jarring note. He had a story to tell of having once discovered the millionaire under an assumed name among the steerage passengers on a coasting boat. 'He was sneaking up to one of his stations, Mrs. Tregaskiss, so that he might pounce upon the manager unawares. As it was, he did catch the poor fellow napping, and dismissed him forthwith.'

'Which proves that Mr. Chance had reason for his precautions,' answered Clare coldly.

'You are a friend of old Cyrus?' said Geneste quickly, feeling that he had made a mistake.

'Hallo! here's Hansen!' broke in Tregaskiss. 'Didn't expect you so soon. What luck have you had?'

Mr. Hansen was the young man from the out-station. He was a colonial by birth—a

big, raw-boned, red-faced, large-limbed creature, with mild blue eyes and a shaggy, ugly face. Ning, who adored him, flew into his arms, crushing her white frock and red sash.

'Oh, mine cobbon! glad to see you, Hanny. Mine velly glad,' correcting herself conscientiously. 'You been bring me quantongs?'

'All right, pickaninny, I've got something better than quantongs. See after dinner. Well, you see, Boss, I thought I'd try and push for a civilized Sunday, now the missus is back. I hope you are better, Mrs. Tregaskiss, though you don't look too jolly well. I'm at your orders. If the Boss will let me stop over Monday, I'll scrub out a room, turn laundress, or do anything else you like.'

'Oh, she's all right,' interrupted Tregaskiss. 'How have you got on with the stock?'

'Pretty fair; branded a hundred and seventy calves from the Eurella country. We rather did a record yesterday. Branded, turned the beasts up to All's Well Camp, killed, salted, and were done in time for a bogey in the creek before dinner. That was

pretty good, for the cattle don't draft well through Korunda yard.'

'Oh, that be blowed for a yarn,' cried Tregaskiss. 'You're used to the yard here, but I'd sooner draft through Korunda yard myself. See many fats? The butchers may be up any day now.'

'Well, you'll have a job to get the number of fat cows,' replied Hansen. 'But we're keeping you, Mrs. Tregaskiss. Oh, how do you do, Dr. Geneste? Shand is cleaning himself, Boss; you'll not wait for him.'

'Have a nip before you begin,' said Tregaskiss, offering the whisky impartially. 'It will give you an appetite. But the missus won't let you drink it neat, Hansen. There's cold water out in the bag.'

'Mrs. Tregaskiss, that's a libel,' protested the young man. 'I never take my grog neat. Look here, Boss, big as you are, I don't mind having a turn with the gloves and fighting it out.'

Tregaskiss liked the implied deference of the title 'Boss.' Mr. Hansen was a favourite of his. To-night he was boisterously good-humoured. They all sat down to the meal,

which was half tea, half dinner, most of the gentlemen beginning with a 'nip' of whisky and ending with tea, which Clare dispensed.

Presently Mr. Shand appeared in a clean suit of white duck.

Dr. Geneste also was in white duck, and wore a starched shirt. The other two had on flannel shirts and light alpaca coats. Clare noticed that Geneste's sleeve-links were fine 'Alexanders,' and that he had a curious looking antique hanging from his watch-chain. She was a woman to whom such trifles appealed; they added to the individuality he was assuming in her eyes. He told her that, in old days, he had indulged a fad for collecting coins, and hoped that she would soon see his collection at Darra-Darra as well as some Egyptian scarabei, which he had there as well.

'You ought to be interested in Egyptian relics,' he said. 'I don't know whether you have been told that your face is of the old Egyptian type.'

'I have always wished very much to go to Egypt,' she said.

They fell into talk, taking a leap far from

the Leura. When with him each fresh time she had the feeling that they were resuming the thread of some former intimate acquaintanceship, and that already they stood apart in a world which was not the world even of Helen Cusack. Not for years had she looked so handsome or so interested, and this fact struck Tregaskiss as he looked at her across the table, and annoyed him. He interrupted the conversation by asking Geneste some question about the fattening properties of Darra-Darra, and the talk became general again, and confined within the range of Leura interests. Hansen broke in :

'Do you remember that big roan bullock, Boss, that Joe lost on Brigalow Creek? Well, I got him, but he was as wild as a scrubber, and I let him go again by Lake Eungella. I say, Mrs. Tregaskiss, you should just see the lake now. There must have been a lot of rain up there last year, though it was pretty dry down here. Of course, it's shallow, but it looks like an inland sea. If you stand on one side you can hardly make out the other. Covered

with birds, it is. There are thousands of swans and ducks. And the pelicans! My word, I've brought Ning a whole winter frock of skins. I wish you could feel the salt fresh breeze, Mrs. Tregaskiss; it would just set you up. By Jove! it would be a sound spec to put up a hotel and advertise the lake as the sanatorium of the West.'

'Wait till there comes a three years' drought,' said Geneste. 'I've seen the lake perfectly dry, with a bed of what I thought was coarse sand till I examined it and found a bed of tiny shells. Have you ever been to Lake Eungella, Mrs. Tregaskiss?'

'Never,' she answered.

Hansen proposed that they should get up a picnic; it only meant a night's camping out and good horses. Blanchard said that the Cusacks had been talking of an expedition; Miss Cusack was very anxious for it. And then Geneste suggested that the three stations should join and carry out the plan.

'Yes, when we're less short-handed, and when the Unionists have settled down and Cusack has got over his funk of being attacked,' put in Tregaskiss.

The labour troubles were again discussed. Mr. Blanchard reported anew rumours from beyond Ilganda. Clare was struck by some remarks the young man made which showed a thoughtful grasp of the labour problem and an intelligent sympathy with the working class. She saw that he was much older and more developed than she had at first supposed. At Brinda Plains he had seemed to her retiring and, as far as personal influence went, almost insignificant. This, she now realized, had been the result of the Cusacks' chaff. Relieved from that oppression, he showed himself a gentleman of culture and character. There was something peculiarly attractive about his smile, and in a certain 'other-worldliness' he seemed to exhale. Later on she spoke about him to Dr. Geneste. They had climbed the little stair to the upper veranda. Tregaskiss and the two Mount Wombo young men remained deep in station matters. Mr. Blanchard had gone to the Bachelors' Quarters for his pipe. Geneste followed Mrs. Tregaskiss to the further end of the veranda, where she went to replenish one of the camp ovens kept stoked

with burning sandal-wood boughs. This sandal-wood smell drove away the mosquitoes and gave forth an agreeable odour. Down below, beyond the garden fence, half a dozen horses followed the example of the humans and gathered for protection from insects round a smoking rubbish-heap. The moon was rising over the lagoon and the clouds had disappeared, the heavens showing deep blue and star-lit. A blacks' camp was pitched at the further end of the lagoon, the shape of the gunyas and an occasional black form standing out in the moonlight, and now and then there would float up echoes of a dog's bark or a Corroboree tune. Beyond the opening of the lagoon stretched the vast plain, which to Clare had always something mystic in its dim expanse; and the semicircle, of which the lagoon formed the base, was closed in by melancholy gidia scrub. Geneste helped Clare to put more boughs into the little furnace, and the odorous smoke thickened. The door into her room stood open—he could tell that it was her room by the light of a lamp turned low and by the baby's cot, round which mosquito netting was

drawn close. She left him for a few minutes to assure herself that all was well.

'I always feel nervous,' she said, returning and seating herself on a canvas chair near him, 'since once we found a scorpion under Ning's pillow.'

He leaned against the railings, studying her profile as it showed itself against the dark slab wall.

'Tell me about Mr. Blanchard,' she asked suddenly. 'I didn't notice him much at Brinda; I thought he was only the ordinary new-chum, and now he strikes me as being quite different and decidedly interesting.'

'Yes; he is interesting. I found that out one night over our pipes at Darra when he opened himself a bit to me.'

Mrs. Tregaskiss waited, not liking to appear intrusive.

'Aren't you going to smoke?' she asked presently.

'You don't mind? It keeps the mosquitoes away, anyhow.'

He prepared and lit his pipe, puffing meditatively for a few moments.

'There's a lot more in Blanchard than

appears on the surface,' Geneste went on. 'He doesn't show himself as he is in the Cusack atmosphere, unless,' he added, 'Miss Cusack's womanly sympathy brings out something of the real man. I can hardly imagine how that could fail to have effect.'

'Yes,' assented Clare vaguely, slightly jarred by the allusion to Miss Cusack; 'tell me something about him, if you may.'

'He was a clergyman, educated for and thrown into a family living. It seems to have been something of the "Robert Elsmere" story. He couldn't preach what he did not believe, and proclaimed himself an agnostic from the family pulpit. Of course he left the Church. There was a great quarrel with his father, who disinherited him. Then——'

'He came out here, I suppose.'

'No; he worked for a bit in the East End of London, and was in the thick of that big strike of the dockers. Now I'm getting on the confidential part of the "opening out," Mrs. Tregaskiss, and that, as you can guess, means a woman. When an Englishman over twenty-five takes to the Bush, in nine

cases out of ten a woman is at the bottom of it.'

She longed to ask him whether this statement held good in his own case, but instead she remarked :

'I suppose the Cusacks don't know anything of that story of his leaving the Church. If they did they would hardly chaff him about being like a bishop. I understand now why he winced.'

'Oh no,' answered Geneste; 'I have not mentioned it to anyone but you.' Clare's heart warmed with satisfaction; he had not, then, made a confidante of Helen. 'Mrs. Cusack is too kind-hearted to knowingly give anyone pain. I don't think—in fact, I am sure—that Blanchard would like it to come to their ears. He has only been there a short time—came on a mere outside introduction, and does not wish his antecedents gossipped about. Though he talked about things to me, he is curiously reticent. I speak of him to you with the less hesitation, because he happened to say that you were a woman whom a man instinctively trusts. I have no doubt that some day, if you

care to hear it, he will tell you his own story.'

'I am glad he thinks I can be trusted,' she said, and was silent for a minute or two.

The discussion at the other end of the veranda had become noisy. It rang monotonous changes on the eternal subject of cattle, on the sharp practices of Cyrus Chance, and the brag of Mr. Cusack, and didn't appear greatly to Mr. Blanchard's taste, for after joining in it for a few moments, he strolled to the upper level towards his hostess and Dr. Geneste.

'I see you don't mind smoke, Mrs. Tregaskiss,' he began, and added, with a certain shyness, 'I wish you would let me see your drawing-room—we have been sitting all the time in the veranda—and I am told that it is so pretty and uncommon—like an English room. It would be nice to see an English room again.'

'You shall see it, certainly, but mine isn't an English room at all; it's much more a barbaric one, with its South Sea Island things; and it isn't pretty, either, and you mustn't expect anything fine, like your grand Brinda

Plains drawing-room. Ning and I always feel very humble when we come back after a visit there. Mine is only a collection of rubbish and home-made odds and ends, and no one admires it except Mr. Chance.'

'I did not know,' said Geneste, 'that Cyrus Chance ever gave himself the opportunity of admiring a lady's drawing-room.'

'Ah! as he put it to-day, the merit of mine lies in the fact that it can't have run over a ten-pound note,' answered Mrs. Tregaskiss. 'Come, we will have some music. Mr. Blanchard, you must sing to us.'

She led the way to the lower building. The windows of the sitting-room were open front and back, and made it comparatively cool, and the dim light of two or three shaded lamps offered less attraction to the winged things than the unshielded one by which 'Gusta was clearing the dinner-table in the next room. The night was so still that, notwithstanding the complete draught, the lamps did not flare.

'It *is* a pretty room,' said Blanchard. 'I never saw one like it.'

That was not surprising. Mrs. Tregaskiss

had utilized homely materials, such as everyone else on the Leura would have despised. Moreover, she had not learned how to mix colours in the Waraker studio for nothing. It was nearly all her own handiwork and that of stray helpers in the shape of Chinamen, Kanaka boys, good-natured stockmen, and new-chums. Tregaskiss' part was a fiction of his wife's generous imagination. At any rate, the trace of it had disappeared. The walls were of brown canvas, upon which was stretched South Sea tapa, painted in queer barbaric patterns, orange, brown, and dull red and blue. Where the tapa ran short she had carried out a suggestion of background in blue and ochreish-red, and had fixed up upon it spears, paddles, grotesque figureheads of canoes, shields, arrows, and all kinds of native weapons, and from the rough rafters which supported the inner-drawn canvas ceiling she had hung a number of quaint South Sea gourds. All these spoils had come from a trading vessel that had put into Port Victoria, and which Clare had boarded with her husband in search of a Kanaka servant. She had admired, bar-

gained, and at last, to Keith's derisive amusement, purchased. The woodwork of the room was of brown natural grain, and on her curtains Clare had embroidered barbaric designs to match the tapa. Matting covered the earthen floor, and on it lay rugs and a great hearthrug of native-dogs' skins. The big fireplace was stacked with melons, yellow and green, and banked by maidenhair ferns. On each side were low, rudely-manufactured sofas, their broad seats upholstered in a fine sort of South Sea Island matting, with quantities of great downy cushions making big blotches of colour. There were books in plenty, and cushioned squatters' chairs, and one or two good etchings—a survival of Queen's Gate days—a writing-table with English equipments, a little silver-table, and many photographs. Among these the big Mendelssohn portrait of Gladys Hilditch took a prominent place.

'It isn't a bit English, but it's arranged just like an English room,' young Blanchard was conceding, when he stopped suddenly, his eyes arrested by the photograph, which he looked at for a moment with mere curiosity,

and then with a startled interest that made Clare wonder.

'Mrs. Tregaskiss!' he exclaimed, his voice shaking in spite of his effort to control it, 'oh, where did you get this?'

Clare repeated the story of the photograph almost as she had told it to Cyrus Chance.

'You know my friend, Mrs. Hilditch?' she asked unnecessarily, for the young man's pale face and glowing eyes, full of agitation, were a plain answer to her question.

'She—they had a house near my people,' he stammered.

Clare pointed to the mourning dress.

'Then you must have heard whether this means that she has lately had a great trouble.'

'I—how should I know?' he began confusedly. 'Do you mean that her husband is dead? Oh no; he was not a young man, and when I knew them he was an invalid—creeping paralysis it was—but they said he would live for years and years, and not get any worse or any better. She was good to him, though he must have tried her greatly. I admired her for that.'

Blanchard had finished his explanation in a mechanical manner. Now he added abruptly :

'No, I don't know. I never hear from my people.'

He turned away as he spoke, and stood for several minutes in silence, his back towards them. Geneste was watching Clare, trying to interpret the curious expression upon her face. It made him think of the wistful smile a lost spirit might wear when watching the admission of a more fortunate soul into Paradise. Then it changed into a look with something in it of self-horror. She caught Geneste's eyes. Her lip quivered, and her eyes pierced his with a reproachful gaze, which seemed to say, 'Why are you always finding me out ?'

'Won't you play something ?' he asked, in quite a matter-of-fact tone. 'Do, Blanchard, go and get some of your songs.'

Clare sat down and struck a few wandering chords, running them into a sort of accompaniment. Blanchard, muttering something about music and his valise, disappeared.

'That was rather a facer for poor Blanchard,' said Geneste.

'Do you mean that she—Gladys—was the woman? You said that a woman was the reason of his coming out here.'

'Yes; I suppose she was the woman; he did not tell me her name, but the fact seems to speak for itself.'

'Oh no! I dare say he was in love with her, but not Gladys with him. She couldn't have cared for him.'

'Why?'

'Oh, she wasn't like that. We — she looked upon that kind of thing as sacred. It was her ideal; she chose to give it up because she believed it unattainable, and she wouldn't be contented with anything short of the best. Of course, she never cared in that sense for poor Mr. Hilditch; but she was quite honest, and told him so.'

'And you?' he said, striking abruptly off the subject of Gladys and Blanchard. 'Was that why you married, too? Had you given up your ideal because you believed it unattainable.'

'No—I—yes, I gave it up. I don't know

why you always make me tell you the truth. I am very glad I gave it up. An ideal is always safe when it is unrealized—when it is one which it does not seem possible can ever be realized.'

'You are wrong, like many a cynic,' he said in a low voice. 'It is possible to realize one ideal on earth—the ideal of love. I wonder if you will ever find that out?'

'I hope not,' she answered.

'If you do not,' he went on, 'you will have lived without experience of the one perfect human joy. If, on the other hand, you do find it out, you may be laying up for yourself the most exquisite of human pains. I don't know which to hope for you, but I cannot feel that you will live out your life in ignorance.'

She went on playing for a few minutes, then she said with studied indifference:

'I don't think Mr. Blanchard can have known Gladys Hilditch very intimately. If he had done so, she would have spoken to him of me, and he would not have been so taken aback at the sight of her photograph in my house.'

'Isn't that a feminine induction? When a man and woman are very much engrossed with each other they are apt to forget their friends—especially if they haven't met—the friends, I mean—for a long time.'

'More than ten years,' said Clare. 'And Gladys is a bad correspondent.'

'Were you greatly devoted to Mrs. Hilditch? I have heard you mention her before. Are you the kind of woman to be wholly devoted to another woman?'

'No; I don't think I was ever the kind of woman to be wholly devoted to anyone. But Gladys was the only real girl friend I ever had.'

'So you were always lonely,' he said. 'Lonely, grand, and mysterious, like the Sphinx of the desert.' He broke off with a laugh that covered his romantic speech. 'I told you before that you were like the Sphinx.'

'The sphinxes on the Embankment? Those are the only ones I know. Yes; people used to say I had their type of features. But I don't think there's anything else sphinx-like about me, Dr. Geneste.

Life on the Leura doesn't suggest mysteries. For me it is only a very dull round of'—she paused for an instant—'of commonplace duties.'

'Performed with a brave smile when you know, and I know, that your heart and intellect and soul must be enduring slow agonies of starvation. I once saw you unmasked, remember. There's no use in pretending.'

Their eyes interchanged a look, and hers dropped.

'No,' she answered, after a moment; 'there's no use in pretending; and starvation of the soul *is* slow agony—as bad as physical starvation, and lasting much longer. But I suppose even that must come to an end some day. Don't talk of *me* any more.'

Mr. Blanchard came in with a roll of music. If the sight of Gladys Hilditch's picture had caused him an emotion, he had pulled himself together by this time.

'I brought over two or three songs, Mrs. Tregaskiss, that I think you may like,' he said composedly. 'Perhaps you wouldn't mind trying over the accompaniments.' His

eyes looked smarting and a little wild, Clare thought, but his lips were set very determinedly.

'I wonder if he was really in love with Gladys,' she said to herself.

CHAPTER XIV.

ENGLISH MAIL.

SUNDAY morning was late and lazy at Mount Wombo for everyone but its mistress and the faithful Hanny, as Ning called Mr. Hansen, who, true to his offer of help, appeared at the dairy door when Clare set to work on her milk-pans. The excellent Ah Sin had no vocation here, and Mrs. Tregaskiss had long made the dairy one of her 'duties.' Tregaskiss lay in bed as long as was possible. When he appeared he looked puffy, dull, and his eyes were bloodshot. From these signs Geneste drew his own conclusions, confirmed later by Hansen's remark that the Boss had made rather a night of it talking Strike and wetting his wrath against the strikers. Geneste had gone to bed before the others,

and Blanchard had said good-night early and walked down to smoke a pipe by the lagoon, and, his friend conjectured, to dream about Gladys Hilditch.

Mrs. Tregaskiss made tea, and was reserved and polite. She looked cool, pale, and calm in her gray cotton gown, fashioned with a certain classical simplicity unknown on the Leura, where the ladies were given to furbelows and home-made copies of the dresses in the *Queen*. Ning handed round the coffee-cups and chattered enough to hide her mother's preoccupation and her father's morose silence. After breakfast the men lounged about the lower veranda, smoked, read papers, and wrote letters in readiness for Jemmy Rodd, the mail-man, who was expected that day. It was a relief to Blanchard to find that morning service was not read by either master or mistress, for he had suffered from the fuss and ceremony with which 'Church'—obligatory upon all station hands—was conducted by the Cusacks. Clare held her own religious exercises in the veranda upstairs, where Geneste, dragged by Ning, found her giving instruction to Claribel, a

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half-caste black gin from the camp called Nona (who was nursing a very young pickaninny), and a half-caste boy, son of one of the black-boys and a white woman. She was dismissing her class when he came up, and when her pupils had gone she burst into a laugh of real merriment—almost the first he had ever heard from her lips.

'I must tell you something that Peter said just now,' she exclaimed. 'Peter is the little half-caste boy, and he is ever so much sharper than either Nona or Claribel. Nona is not one of my regular pupils; she is really a Brinda black, and is over here with her tribe. I was trying to teach them a few elementary truths about astronomy as well as a little orthodox religion, and was explaining that as we revolved on our own axis it was the same sun we saw every morning, whereupon Peter confounded me by remarking, "My not think it much of that fellow God. What for He no make it new sun every morning! What for always use up old one?"'

'Hi, Clare!' shouted Tregaskiss from the lower level. 'Here's Rodd. Ask Geneste

if he wants his mail-bag, or if it is to go on to Darra.'

Geneste and Clare went round to the back veranda, which looked down upon the yard. Jemmy Rodd had just arrived, and was undoing his bundle of leather mail-bags, each sealed with the big official seal.

'Good-day, ma'am,' said Rodd, interrupting what seemed to be a stormy colloquy with Tregaskiss, and exchanging some local remarks with Clare.

The master of Mount Wombo was spluttering out imprecations over a piece of news the mail-man had brought him.

'My Heaven! I'll let them have it if I can get a chance,' he was shouting. 'I'll insist upon the police turning out. It's a disgrace to a civilized country. What do you think of this?' he called out to Geneste. 'Those devils of strikers have cut the throats of three of my best horses, and my drays are stuck up on the other side of Ilganda. I hear they've burned down Craig's woolshed and are coming this way. We shall have to arm, and, by the Lord! I'll give them no quarter.'

'Oh, they won't bother just yet about coming here; they'll be making for the big sheepowners first,' said Rodd consolingly. 'Good-day, Mrs. Tregaskiss; the little Leura Terror has got a load this time. Don't you be frightened, ma'am; they are mostly Unionist shearers under Kelso, and it'll be the turn of Brinda Plains before yours.'

'My best dray-horses,' roared Tregaskiss. 'Look here, Hansen, we'll start the first thing to-morrow; and do you just see that the firearms are all cleaned.'

He stormed out threats for a few minutes, not sparing oaths.

Geneste had gone down the steps and got his mail-bag, which he opened, taking out his letters and papers and delivering the bag again to Rodd.

'These are for the Darra hands. I needn't seal it, Rodd.' And then he looked up at Clare. 'Mrs. Tregaskiss, don't you want your letters? Shall I bring them up to you? I see there's an English mail in.'

At the words 'English mail' the new-chums drew closer, and Tregaskiss cut the string of the bag, sorting out the contents in

little packets. There were three or four for Clare, and these Geneste took to her, and then went back to the group of men. When later he returned to Mrs. Tregaskiss, she was sitting at her own corner of the veranda reading a letter of thin foreign sheets. She looked up, and asked him for particulars of the outrage. He understood that it was not from apathy she had escaped, but to avoid the sound of her husband's oaths. Tregaskiss was one of those men whom the presence of a lady would not restrain from swearing, certainly not that of his wife. There was nothing more to tell. Rodd's information was so meagre that it was certain that Jemmy the Liar was for once keeping to the strict truth, and that the non-arrival of the drays was accounted for. The Unionists had begun hostilities.

Blanchard came up with another letter for Mrs. Tregaskiss, which had been sorted into the wrong pack.

'Have you got yours?' asked Geneste.

'No,' he answered; 'they are in the Brinda bag. It doesn't matter. I don't expect anything from England.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Clare, looking in a puzzled manner at the one he had brought her. 'This is from Gladys, too; I can't make it out.'

Blanchard deliberately sat down and took up a newspaper Geneste had been reading. Clare looked up with bright, excited eyes.

'Mr. Blanchard, I've got news for you. You said you knew Mrs. Hilditch. Well, before very long you'll perhaps see her. She's coming here.'

Blanchard gave an odd little gasp and went very white. The voice in which he answered was quite mechanical.

'Coming here? How is that?'

'Mr. Hilditch is dead; he had a dreadful illness. He died—let me see, it must be nearly a year ago. Gladys has been ill, too. She has had something wrong with her nerves, and the doctors have ordered her a voyage. She is coming out to Australia by the British India Line, and will stop at Port Victoria. To think of Gladys at Port Victoria

Mrs. Tregaskiss laughed—again with the note of girlish gladness. The thought of seeing Gladys seemed a renewal of youth. Blanchard said not a word. She went on:

'I ought to have got this when she sent the photograph; she was going to sail immediately.' She ran her eyes over the second letter. 'Yes, this is from Gladys, too, from Colombo; she was breaking the voyage there. It's like a play when the announcement and the arrival come together. She will be at Port Victoria by the next boat, and she wants to come up here.'

Geneste remembered that he had a letter to send by Jemmy Rodd, and left the other two together. Clare looked Mr. Blanchard full in the face.

'Tell me,' she asked, 'did you know Mrs. Hilditch very well?'

Blanchard hesitated. 'I knew her,' he said. 'I think I knew her pretty well.'

'She never talked to you about me?'

'Oh no. Yes, I remember her saying she had a friend who was married and in Australia, but she did not mention your name. Mrs. Hilditch was extremely modern,' he added, after a moment. 'She went forward and looked forward, rather than backward. She was very much taken up with life as it moved at the moment round her. She always wanted

to be up to date and to march with the new ideas.'

'Gladys was always full of new ideas.'

'But she did not hold to her ideas for long at a time,' he said. 'She only cared for them if they meant a new sensation. I think she got into a way of looking upon life as a drama, which must be exciting if nothing else. Contrasts were delightful to her. She was essentially a woman of luxury, but she played at East End work, touching hands with sordid tragedy for the sake of enjoying her ease and luxury the more when she went back to them.' There was great bitterness in his tone.

'I knew Gladys Waraker well, Mr. Blanchard,' cried Clare indignantly; 'and I know that you are unjust to her.'

'Ah! but you have not known Gladys Hilditch,' he answered. 'If you had, you would understand that I am only quoting her own estimate of herself. I think,' he added, 'that her marriage and the immense riches it brought her must have made a great change in her character. She had a trying life with her invalid husband, and

she took what distraction she could find abroad.'

'I never saw Mr. Hilditch. He was a ship-owner, wasn't he? Tell me what he was like.'

Blanchard hesitated again. 'He was like —oh, to say he was the conventional *nouveau riche* would describe him pretty fairly. He was not a bad sort, but he was vulgar and a bore. He used to sit at the head of his dinner-table—wheeled in—and he talked a good deal about himself, and drew people's attention to his wife's jewels and to the points in her which painters admired.'

'And now he is dead.'

'Now he is dead,' repeated Blanchard calmly.

'Mr. Blanchard,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss boldly, 'shall you be glad or sorry to see Gladys Hilditch again?'

His face worked slightly.

'It is hard to say. I shall be sorry because it will be a revival of some painful associations. I shall be glad because—one is always glad, Mrs. Tregaskiss, to see a woman who has once deeply interested him. It's not possible to help it.'

'*Once?*' she said. He did not reply. She half stretched out her hand in an impulsive movement. 'I am Gladys' friend, and I don't think, when we come together, that she will keep many secrets from me. If I can help you in any way, you may trust me.'

'I know that. But, with regard to Mrs. Hilditch, there is nothing in which you can help me. I dare say Geneste told you something of what I mentioned to him—about my life?' he added abruptly.

'Yes—only a bald outline. He spoke of your career as a clergyman. Please let me say that I admire and honour you for your courage and honesty.'

'Oh, that! Of course there was nothing else to do. Besides, it meant liberation, and truth instead of a horrible sham.'

'But it destroyed your worldly prospects.'

'I suppose it did. That, however, was not so important. I was sorry about some things—the working with the poor, and such-like. I tried being a sort of lay preacher of the humanities in the East End, but——' He stopped.

'Gladys interfered,' mentally filled in

Clare. 'Dr. Geneste told me nothing confidential,' she said aloud. 'He thought you would not mind my knowing that much.'

'Oh no, I am very glad. In fact, I gave him a sort of permission—if you cared. It's very good of you to be interested in me, Mrs. Tregaskiss—and of Geneste, too. He has got a way of worming out one's secrets. I don't mean anything disparaging—quite the reverse. But there's something human in his way of taking one that compels a fellow to speak out from the inside of him.'

'Yes; I have felt that.'

'It's his power of sympathy, I suppose, and the sense of a common bond of suffering. He has gone through a good deal himself.'

'I should fancy that being a doctor has taught him to understand human nature,' said Clare.

Blanchard's words had lifted a vague weight from her mind. She had been a little troubled and just a little ashamed of the tendency in herself to reveal the inner things of her mind to Dr. Geneste. It seemed to indicate an attraction—something she could not think of without a faint blush; something

which she could not even put into words. But if Blanchard, who was a man, felt the same, why should she mind, since she was but a weak woman?

'Not only that,' Blanchard answered; 'though I dare say it has a good deal to do with it. I believe he was thought a good deal of as a physician, Mrs. Tregaskiss. I've come across references to him, and I've read some things he has written. No, it isn't only that. I wonder if this would be breach of confidence. I can't think so. He invited my confidence by partly giving me his own. Geneste very nearly wrecked his life for a woman.'

'Ah!'

'But he had the strength to—flee temptation. That's what an infatuation for an unworthy woman means, even if a man intends to marry her.'

'You seem to half imply—Mr. Blanchard, it is not possible that you can have the faintest notion in your mind of Gladys Hilditch?'

'God forbid! Let us leave Mrs. Hilditch out of the question. I see you have

jumped to a conclusion—not unnatural. My ridiculous upset at the sight of her photograph—and—all the rest. But I assure you that I am nothing to Mrs. Hilditch, nor she to me, beyond being, as I said, a lady in whom I was once much interested.'

He got up as if to close the conversation, but lingered, fidgeting with the newspaper.

'I thank you sincerely all the same, Mrs. Tregaskiss; and, as you say, I dare say Mrs. Hilditch will tell you anything there may be to tell.' After a moment or two, he added in a different tone, 'I'm glad you like Geneste. I've got to know him pretty well. You see, he is a good deal at Brinda Plains. It's bad luck for him, that lame leg. Cripples him a bit and puts a stop to his wild life. An explorer among dangerous blacks needs to be sound of wind and limb.'

'Yes. Is Dr. Geneste sorry to give all that up?'

'No, I don't fancy so. He is not so young as he was. And, after all, he has done splendid service in opening up country. I almost wonder he doesn't go back to England. He keeps touch with it by his

articles. I suppose you read that one in the *Nineteenth Century?*'

'No,' said Clare. Blanchard talked about the article for a few moments, and offered to get it for her. Presently she said, 'Perhaps there is an attraction on the Leura for Dr. Geneste?'

'You mean Miss Cusack? He's old for her, Mrs. Tregaskiss; and he couldn't fall in love with that girl—charming, and pretty, and angelic as she is—in a way that a man like him would be in love with—a woman of the world—*has* been in love with such a woman. Still, that would be the salvation of the affair, don't you think? if he did marry her. He has gone through all the fiery business long ago, and his feeling for her would be quite different—more tender and more protecting; but not love.'

'You think he will marry her?' said Mrs. Tregaskiss, in a low voice.

'Yes; I often fancy so. I can't help thinking,' Blanchard went on, unconsciously following out poor Helen's train of thought, 'that if Elaine hadn't pined herself to death, Launcelot would have married her in the

long-run, and settled down comfortably at Camelot. I had an idea some little time ago that they were almost, if not quite, engaged; but I've changed my opinion since he was last over. If anybody is in the running now, it looks like young Gillespie. She is a nice girl, Mrs. Tregaskiss—just the sort of girl a fellow would like his sister to be.'

Mr. Hansen lounged up, leading Ning, his ugly face all abeam with content.

'Isn't she good, the pickaninny! I say, Mrs. Tregaskiss, the Boss sent me to tell you that he'd be glad for you to go down to the office. He's posting up the station log. I offered to do it, but he said no one but you knew what had been doing about the place. I must say I *am* enjoying to-day,' Mr. Hansen went on in a burst of confidence as he accompanied Clare down the veranda. 'The pickaninny is splendid company; and it's awfully jolly to come to a place on Sunday and find everybody clean and camping in the veranda, you know, especially when you get a good dinner, and the mail comes in and there are the papers to read. You see, one is taught a religion when one is

young,' added Mr. Hansen apologetically, 'and the least you can do to keep it up is to camp on Sunday, and wear a coat and a white shirt.'

Blanchard laughed. It was a compendium of Bush orthodoxy. To put on a clean shirt and to camp on Sunday is the stockman's open profession of allegiance to a Higher Being.

CHAPTER XV.

DOWN WITH THE FEVER.

It was a week later. Clare Tregaskiss was alone at Mount Wombo. Tregaskiss and Mr. Hansen had started off with pack-horses to bring back what they could save from the wreckage of the drays. Mr. Hansen had returned with Jo Ramm and his team of bullocks, pressed into the service, carrying most of the loading; but Tregaskiss had gone to Ilganda, and was still absent. Times were turbulent just now on the Leura, and no doubt he wished to be where his presence was most likely to be useful—at the headquarters of the Pastoralist Committee. So his wife reasoned. He had offered a reward in hope of discovering the perpetrators of the outrage upon his horses, and it

was owing to his urgent complaints, as much as to Mr. Cusack's frenzied entreaties for police protection, that a military patrol had been told off for the district and a force of special constables enrolled.

The delayed shearing was proceeding vigorously at Brinda Plains and at other large sheep-stations employing Southern labour, and so incensed were the Unionists that they threatened to burn every one of the wool-sheds and to wreck the train bearing wool-bales from Cedar Hill to Port Victoria.

There was little or nothing to fear for Mount Wombo, unless it were on the score of Tregaskiss' personal unpopularity, to which no doubt was owing the loss he had sustained in the sticking-up of his drays. Mount Wombo, Darra-Darra, and a few others were cattle-stations, and employed but a few men. Tregaskiss, at any rate, appeared to take it for granted that his wife was perfectly safe with no other protector than Shand and the two Chinamen. Hansen had gone back to the out-station, where he was more needed, as a muster was going on;

and, besides, there was extra work at the Bore in view of the continued drought, and even Mr. Shand was absent a whole day at a time carrying rations thither.

Clare Tregaskiss was not nervous in the sense in which ordinary women are nervous. In fact, she rather relished the fillip to her monotonous existence. And then — oh, miserable certainty! long since established in her mind—the absence of her husband was an untold relief.

She roused herself by an effort of will from the dreamy mood into which she had lately fallen. She had got into a way of brooding restlessly upon the limitations of her lot. Geneste's words haunted her.

It seemed hard that she should never know the sweetest of human joys. He had known it, or he could not have spoken with so much fervour. Had he, then, so loved the worthless woman upon whom he had so nearly, according to Blanchard, thrown away his life? Could she have been worthless if he had thus loved her? She wondered and wondered, and somehow in their acquaintance every look, word, gesture of Geneste's

seemed to stand out and acquire a new significance.

She was wise enough to know that this brooding was unhealthy, but her very preoccupation enabled her to bear more calmly the jar of Tregaskiss' companionship. Now that he was gone, she could throw herself more readily into her daily tasks. She set to work upon some calico frocks for Ning, and began a campaign against 'Gusta's negligences.

She had the Bachelors' Quarters cleaned and reorganized, the store put tidy, and certain alterations made in the arrangement of the furniture of the house. Much of this she did with her own hands; and it was in trying to move a heavy table that she strained her back, and then one day discovered that her body was aching disproportionately and that she was very cold, although the thermometer stood at over 100°. When the fits of shivering were followed by severer pain, and by fever and giddiness, she knew, without being told, that she was in for a touch of Northern fever.

The second day that it racked her—or,

rather, the fourth from seizure, for this fever holds its victim on alternate days—as ill-luck would have it, butchers came, and Mr. Shand was compelled to take them to a distant part of the run, which involved two nights away from the head-station. He left her with uneasiness and regret, but he could do nothing except send a message to Tregaskiss by the mail-man, who was passing, and another to Jo Ramm's wife, who was camped with her husband's drays some twenty miles distant, begging her to take the first opportunity of getting to Mount Wombo. Mrs. Ramm was one of the resources of the district when servants ran short or a sick-nurse was wanted.

All day Clare lay aching, burning, and dizzy, with barely energy enough to take such simple remedies as suggested themselves, and helpless under the clumsy ministrations of the half-caste, 'Gusta, and Ah Sin. She remained stretched upon the sofa in the drawing-room, wrapped in her opossum cloak, seeing curious visions and deluded by wandering fancies, longing, when she could think collectively, that the hours would pass

and bring her to the off-day of comparative ease.

It was four o'clock. Ning was playing with her doll by her mother's side, acting a tragedy of 'Debil-debil.' The child's imagination, fed by the legends of the blacks' camp, had of late been exercising itself upon this mythical personage.

'Pickaninny, you stop inside there,' rehearsed Ning, putting her doll in the centre of a circle on the carpet, defined by tiny heaps of twigs, which she called her fires. She had seen Claribel light fires round the playground to keep Debil-debil away. 'Mummy, my make plenty fire, and suppose Debil-debil look after Pickaninny, he sit down alongside fire, and Pickaninny quite safe. Cobbon old, that fellow Debil-debil. Cobbon cold, like it, Mummy. Ba'al he got him 'possum rug. Budgery fire—my mean very good fire. No touch Ning's Pickaninny.'

But Ning's dramatic instinct demanded that Pickaninny should be naughty and stray beyond the circle into the clutches of Debil-debil, who was represented by a nigger doll,

mutilated, and of forbidding aspect. Pickaninny was lost under the sofa, whither Debil-debil had carried her. Ning tragically roamed the room, ringing her hands like a bereft Demeter, while she sang a blacks' 'Ugal,' which the half-caste had taught her, as the accepted form of exorcism for Debil-debil; or the night-roamer, Yo-wi; or the snake monster, Wa-wi; or any other spirit or 'wunda' whatsoever:

'Yurù dhàri nje: yuri dhàri nje
Dùla ranja burùla: yùri dhàri nje.'

'Oh, Ning, child, don't make so much noise. Mummy has a headache. Mummy is very sick.'

The dogs barked outside. The thud of a horse's hoofs sounded in the yard. Had the Unionists come? Clare wondered vaguely. Ning ceased her outcries as 'Gusta entered.

'Please, Mrs. Tregaskiss, it's a gentleman.'

Clare roused herself, and turned dazed eyes to the door, to encounter the anxious gaze of Geneste.

'You are ill!' he exclaimed. 'And there's nobody to look after you.'

'Mummy's sick, and Pickaninny belonging to me is sick, and Debil-debil has carried her off, and Ning has been a good girl, Dr. Geneste, and has not done anything to make Mummy worse,' announced Ning upon her knees by the sofa, diving for the lost doll, which she had flung far towards the wall.

'All right, Pickaninny; let me come near your mother and see what is the matter with her. Ah! I know what it is.' He had her hand in his, and his fingers upon her pulse. 'You have got a touch of fever. When did it come on?'

'I don't know; I'm all aching and confused. Yes, I suppose it's fever. Is Keith with you?'

'He's at Ilganda, harrying the Pastoralist Committee; they've been having rows there. No; the fact is, Rodd passed and left some sort of message about your being alone, and that I was to tell Tregaskiss, if I saw him; and as I didn't quite like the notion of your being left with only those two Chinamen, I hurried along. Lucky I did, too. Mrs. Tregaskiss, this won't do. You must be got to bed at once.'

He went out and called 'Gusta and Claribel, and between them they prepared Clare's bed, and he carried her in, leaving the two women to undress her. Afterwards he routed about Tregaskiss' office, and found the medicine-chest and the medicines he wanted.

When he came back, Clare was in bed, her eyes wild and her speech wandering. There were alternations of shivering and fever, and he saw that she was in for a rather bad bout. He gave her laudanum to induce perspiration, and by-and-by she got quieter. With the deftness of a nurse he moved about, getting her all that could make her more comfortable, and, oddly enough, there seemed nothing strange to her in his attendance; it was as though she had been used to it long, long ago, and his very presence brought a sense of rest and soothing indescribably delightful.

Geneste was perplexed. Clearly she was not in a condition to be left to the tender mercies of the half-caste and the incompetent 'Gusta. He mentally ran his eye over the list of neighbours, but the only one near was Mrs. Carmody, who needed caring for even

more than Clare. He thought of motherly Mrs. Cusack and sympathetic Helen; but Brinda Plains was fifty-five miles distant, and in a state of siege, all the men on the station sleeping with firearms in readiness, expecting, while the free shearers were at work, an attack on the wool-shed. There was not even a stockman's wife available at Darra-Darra, and he had given up the idea of procuring a nurse as hopeless, when the recollection of Mrs. Ramm, the bullock-driver's wife, camped half-way between the two stations, came to him as an inspiration. That evening, when Clare was sleeping under the influence of the opium, he saddled one of Tregaskiss' horses, put a side-saddle on the quietest of the lady's hacks, and went at full speed in search of Mrs. Ramm. It was twenty miles to Jo's camp, and good riding was needed for them to reach Mount Wombo by breakfast-time.

'I have brought someone to look after you,' he said to Mrs. Tregaskiss when, after having bathed and dressed, he came to pay her a professional visit. She looked the ghost of herself, so pulled down was she, and so shaken.

Mrs. Ramm came in behind him, and made an awkward salutation to the sick mistress.

Mrs. Ramm was short, thick-set, broad-featured, her face pitted with small-pox marks, her wiry iron-gray hair cropped close 'for the convenience of it'; her hands huge, red, and apparently designed by Nature for the use of a scrubbing-brush. But she was scrupulously clean, and her short blue skirt and striped jacket were fresh from the wash.

'Mrs. Ramm!' murmured Clare in astonishment. 'Where did you come from?'

'It's the doctor himself that rode over to the camp last night and fetched me. My word, Mrs. Tregaskiss, I'd have ridden a hundred miles to see a decent woman again! It's a year and more that I've trudged along beside Ramm and the bullock-dray, or else sat on the wool-bales; and now I'm camping by myself close agen the Bore, while he does a job for the road-surveyors. I just went to the men's camp to clean up—Lord! it was dirty. I ain't no great shakes; and them men laughed fine at me with my house under the dray. But I says, "Them as lives in glass houses shouldn't shy stones at them as

lives in drays," and I had the laugh of them when I saw all their muck.'

Clare turned an eloquent look of gratitude on Geneste. How her face had changed, he thought! it had lost that strange masked look. Or was it only when she looked at him that it reflected her real inner self?

'You went all that way to bring her! You must have been on horseback the whole night. And you did it for me!'

'You forget I'm used to that sort of thing. I really couldn't feel happy about you in the hands of Claribel and 'Gusta. Mrs. Ramm may not be a trained nurse, but she knows how to make a bed, anyhow, and can keep things a bit tidy.'

''Deed, sir,' said Mrs. Ramm, bridling up, as she paused in the act of dusting the looking-glass. 'You mustn't think I'm not used to gentlefolks' ways. Before I married Ramm, I was servant to the Mr. Mickle-thwaites, as was just straight from a castle in England. And if you'd 'a' just seen that house: satin cushions, my word! and a Brussels carpet, and hair-brushes with silver letters on 'em—for all the world like yours,

Mrs. Tregaskiss. Not but what you've got a nice place here, and Ramm he do say it does his heart good to look at the gimcracks and flowers about. I allers holds on to flowers; and I mind well how thinks I at them Micklethwaites', "Lor! this droring-room do look that cheerless with ne'er a green sprout or a lady in it." And I gets a dish and puts water in it, and picks a lot of shallot-tops—there warn't nothing but vege-tables—and sticks them in, and, my word! they did look fine, and they smelled beautiful. Them gentlemen was that pleased, they laughed to split their sides when they seed 'em.'

'Well, you needn't put shallot-tops in here, Mrs. Ramm; for there are plenty of flowers in the garden. And you shall go and see if Ah Sin hasn't got something good for Mrs. Tregaskiss' breakfast, and you shall set Ah Sin at once to kill a chicken for broth; and I trust to you to bring it to my patient regularly.'

'You are very good to me,' said Clare softly, when they were alone. 'I don't like to trouble you so.'

He had been preparing a dose, and gave it to her to swallow before he replied. Then he stooped and touched her hand. He had the physician's touch, cool and healing, a touch which should have always something of a magnetic effect upon the nerves, or else it is certain that the doctor has mistaken his vocation.

'Let me be good to myself, by stopping a day or two and trying to get you all right as quickly as I can,' he said, in a matter-of-fact sort of way, though there was a note of tenderness underlying his professional manner. 'You see, to me, it's plying a familiar trade. I'm so thankful that I was at hand. You need looking after.'

She did not answer. All day he came in and out, caring for and arranging things for her comfort just as a mother or sister might have done. When she said this to him he laughed, and answered that it showed doctoring was his real vocation, since he took up his old trade so naturally. He put her food before her himself, arranging the tray, upon which he laid a pale pink rose, and talked to her, and when he thought she was

tired read her to sleep. His companionship was pleasant apart from personal considerations. He had seen much, had read much, and had just the touch of sentiment and mysticism without which no man can appeal absolutely to a cultivated woman.

It was a very long time since Clare had talked of the things she now spoke about to him. Her very weakness and the novelty of the situation contributed to unreserve. She was alone; she was helplessly dependent upon him. Her husband was away; had not even written to tell her his whereabouts; did not appear to concern himself in the least whether she was well or ill cared for. There was not another man except the two Chinamen and the blacks in the camp during these two days anywhere near her.

And here was Geneste, no kin and in no way called upon to consider her well-being, who had come over because he feared all might not be right, had ridden all through the night to secure for her the attendance of a responsible woman—she discerned in this proceeding a delicate chivalry which appealed to her in a manner which would perhaps have

been foreign to Geneste's own thoughts of the matter, and who tended her as her husband had never done; not from the medical point of view, which was natural enough, but with all those nameless tendances, the sweetness of which lies in the manner of their doing, and with always that undercurrent of tenderness, of which, though she could not put it in words, she was acutely conscious.

The next day the fever had her in grip again. It went through all its stages—shivering and racking pain in every limb, and then burning heat and headache, with strange fancies and grotesque pictures standing out in the darkness of closed eyes. Then laudanum stupor with only the consciousness of pain and thirst, and of Geneste standing by putting wet cloths to her head. She was feebly delirious, though she was unaware of it, and in her babblings revealed herself to Geneste, who purposely kept Mrs. Ramm from the room, with the frankness of a child telling its mother of its sufferings.

His heart ached with pity as he listened. What horrible misfit this was of Fate, he

thought, as the sensitive scourged soul laid bare its secret pains—the agonizing jar of companionship with a nature coarse to the core; the battle of conscience with all her womanly instincts, the triumph of conscience and the martyrdom of self-repression. What a lonely life it had been! How starved! how cold! how walled in! how beaten down!

He longed to snatch up the fine tender creature from surroundings so unworthy of her; to bear her away to a refined, luxurious, intellectual home; to give her the moral and mental food her whole being craved; to warm her with sympathy; to nourish her with affection till the poor, bruised, stunted bud should expand and open forth into the glorious flower it was meant to be—such a flower as should gladden the world in which it bloomed. 'What might she not be,' he thought, 'to a man who had her heart!'

In that hour of delirium he got to know the woman herself, and he got to know, too, that he loved her.

He was glad, very glad, that he loved Clare

Tregaskiss. Fifteen years before he had madly loved a woman of bad character—so madly that, but for the accidental discovery of her faithlessness and utter greed, he would have married her. Now he loved a good woman, not so recklessly, but with an even surpassing fervour. He was glad to experience the emotion which he had believed would never again come into his life.

For fifteen years he had forsworn love in its finer acceptation. During the first six or seven of these years, adventure, danger, and the excitement of exploration, had been the valve for his reckless energies. Women's society he had not needed. In fact, he had turned from all that reminded him of his life of civilization with an intense revulsion. Then, during two years, when he had lived at the northern extremity of Leichardt's Land, he had taken to himself a graceful South Sea Island girl, for whom, till she was killed tragically while bathing, he had entertained a half-contemptuous affection.

Looking back upon this episode since the dawning upon him of Clare Tregaskiss, he felt a curious shame. After the girl's death

he made his great expedition across the northern neck of the colony, through unexplored country and hostile natives, from gulf to ocean; and it was then he received the spear-wound which lamed him for life. The hurt had caused a troublesome and dangerous inflammation, and had put a stop to the wild exploring he had delighted in. During his forced inaction he had taken up in a measure his old scholarly and scientific pursuits, and the former man had begun gradually to replace the new one. He had even had vague thoughts of going back to England. There was no question now of lung delicacy. He was not yet beyond the prime of life, and might still have a successful career before him. The Australian career had not been in the financial sense a success, but he had private means, and this did not trouble him. Besides, Darra-Darra, which was not heavily encumbered like Mount Wombo, might turn out a profitable investment when times got better and successive droughts were followed by years of plenty. It was in this wavering mood, when he had half resolved to take a trip to England, and look around

him before making a final decision as to his future, that he met Helen Cusack. He had got into a way of riding over pretty often to Brinda Plains, which was about as far on the other side of Darra-Darra as Mount Wombo was on this one, mainly because the number of hands employed there, and the prevalence during the winter of an influenza epidemic, had called for his professional services, which he gave gratuitously when required. Mrs. Cusack had been rather seriously ill, and during that time he had seen much of Helen. Even before the scene in the garden it had crossed his mind as a not unpleasing possibility that he might marry her and take her to England. But for that sudden jerk of the bit, when he was brought face to face with facts and consequences, the possibility might have become a reality. It might still have become so, for later on, in a reactionary impulse, his mood had swayed to the girl and to the joys of domestic life. But there had intervened the meeting with Mrs. Tregaskiss at Cedar Hill, and their strange night talk at The Grave camp ; and then, though he himself had been at first unconscious of it,

his fate was sealed and Helen's light was henceforth obscured.

In this case there was no reaction, nor were there any doubts. He acknowledged to himself without hesitation that he loved her. He told himself also that his plans of going to England must remain, for some time, at any rate, unfulfilled. It would be his duty to himself and to her, as well as his joy, to stay on the Leura, and to do his best to make life more bearable to this hardly-used woman. He had no base motives. He meant no harm. She was the last woman with whom he could associate any unworthy desire. It should be a case of beautiful Platonics. He loved her. There was nothing disgraceful in that. There could be no shame for her if it happened that she loved him. Something told him she did, or, if not yet, that he would not have long to wait. Why should they not love each other? Her lot was hard, her life very lonely. In the true sense of the word she was not married at all. All that she owed was the mere material obligation. From nature and temperament her lawful possessor was quite in-

capable of appreciating the treasure which a caprice of destiny had allotted him. He foresaw for her even worse times than she had already undergone. The drink habit was growing upon Tregaskiss, as it is apt to do in Australia upon men who have combined it with what is called a 'touch of the sun.' Geneste had from rumour and observation made himself sure of that. There might be other irregularities. Geneste knew, though he concealed his knowledge from Clare, that the flirtation with Miss Lawford, begun during Mrs. Tregaskiss' absence in Port Victoria, was being commented on in the district, and was a source of uneasiness to Mrs. Cusack. He knew too that, instead of being at Ilganda with the Pastoralist Committee, Tregaskiss was spending most of his time at the Ococks', where Miss Lawford was paying a holiday visit.

There was, Geneste gleaned, a good deal of gossip rife about the Tregaskisses. Clare was a woman to pique curiosity, and Tregaskiss' loud manner, his dash, and his good-looking, bloated face and fine, fair, Viking physique, attracted attention wherever he

went. Geneste could understand that, by the law of attraction to contraries, he might gain great influence over a little hysterical brunette like Miss Lawford, and she in her turn over him. It seemed to be only of late that he had developed a liking for the society of women of a certain rollicking type, and he did not confine his attentions to Miss Lawford. There was an inn at Ilganda, kept by an Irish widow and two daughters, where he put up, and where the young women afforded him amusement—of a harmless kind, it is true, but which gave rise to reports derogatory to the dignity of Clare Tregaskiss' husband. Though it was generally known that Tregaskiss was heavily in debt to the Bank, it was known also that he spent a good deal of money on imported cattle, on wire fencing, the construction of Bores, and in other less useful ways. Some people did not scruple to say that before long he would be sold up ; others maintained that he could not keep racehorses, throw his money about betting at the township, and talk so big, if he were not all safe. To be sure, the keeping of racehorses for the Northern Meetings is

not the reckless form of dissipation it might appear; still, there are concomitant expenses which mount up. And their world did not realize that Tregaskiss always talked big—except to his wife. It was an article of his social philosophy so to do. He had made his way in England through talking big on occasions, and he had won Clare Gardyne by talking big about the disinterestedness of his devotion for her.

Three days passed; Shand and the butchers were still at the out-station, and Tregaskiss did not come. The fever had its periodical term, and though the second time it was less severe, Mrs. Tregaskiss was weaker. Geneste did all that was possible to keep up her strength. He killed a calf, and he himself superintended Ah Sin in the making of broth and jelly. He beat up eggs with brandy, and hour by hour poured nourishment down her throat. When free from pain, except for the prostration, she was quite happy. In those three days she seemed to live a life-time: past and future were annihilated, and the present had the luxurious fantasy of an opium-dream. As a matter of fact, the

laudanum which he gave her had much to do with this impression.

A day or two later he got her on to a sofa in the drawing-room; and then they had long idle talks, in which she learned much of him and he much of her. In detail she told him little, but the side-lights which her conversation gave were vividly illuminating.

CHAPTER XVI.

'YOU OUGHT NOT TO HAVE SAID THAT.'

But this could only be an interlude. Geneste had been a week at Mount Wombo, and Clare was on the fair way to recovery. The fever attacks had become less and less trying, and the days of respite were now a dreamy pleasure. She spent them mostly on a hammock in the upper veranda. The passion creeper and native cucumber made a shade from the sun, and threw wavering reflections upon the boards, while the scent of some untimely sandal-wood blossoms floated up from the inclosure.

There had been a storm somewhere—over Lake Eungella, probably—for, alas! it had not travelled to the plains, which were brown and bare, and the cattle were bogging in the

fast-drying water-holes and dying of thirst and want of grass. But the distant storm had at least cooled the air a little, and there was a faint breeze which made the mosquitoes cling to the ceilings. Clare Tregaskiss, in her China silk tea-gown, with her delicate, refined face, her creamy skin, and deep brown eyes, looked herself not unlike a languorous tropical flower. She had a piece of needle-work in her hand, but made very few stitches. Geneste sat beside her. He had been down to the Chinaman's garden, and was preparing a granadilla, scooping out its luscious pulp and flavouring it with sherry, while Ning stood by, the two dolls hunched under her arms, watching the operation with deep interest. The baby, lying on a mat at the other end of the veranda, was crowing up to Claribel, who made blacks' noises for its amusement. Nona, the other half-caste, and her pickaninny down below, joined in every now and then with a guttural 'Yucke! My word, that budgery fellow!' The sun was getting near setting. In the storm quarter a low ridge of clouds was rising. The straight, black gidia trunks cast heavy

shadows, and their silvery gray foliage had a livid look.

The usual group of horses had gathered round the smoking rubbish-heap, and the milkers, a scanty herd in these dry times, were being driven up to the yard. Presently there was a sound of a stockwhip cracking, and a long 'Coo-ee!' and then Tommy George, driving a pack-horse, appeared, jogging through one of the gidia clearings. He called out something to Nona, who took up the story.

'My word, missus! mine think it massa come along directly.'

Clare half rose. She had turned very pale. Her low exclamation had in it a sound of dread.

Geneste did not stop his scooping of the granadilla. He sugared the dainty mess and put it before her.

'Keith is coming,' she said.

'Yes. Lie still. I won't have you getting up to meet him. Besides, he isn't here yet. I'll go and ask Tommy George.'

He went out. When he had gone, Clare sank back again; a patch of red rose in her

cheeks. She called Ning to her and gave her the granadilla.

'Here, child. I don't want it.'

Ning took the fruit and ate it slowly, watching her mother all the time with solemn inquisitiveness.

'Mummy no glad that Daddy is coming back,' she said.

'Oh, you cruel little wretch!' Clare cried passionately. 'What makes you say such things?'

Ning stared still more. Such ebullitions in her mother were rare.

'Mine plenty glad Daddy come back,' she said, with stolid contentment. 'What for Mummy not glad?'

'Oh, go away!' cried Clare. 'Go and play with Claribel. Go, all of you, and meet Daddy down by the Crossing.'

And Ning departed, her solemn gaze haunting her mother, after she had disappeared, like an accusing ghost.

After a little while Geneste returned.

'He will not be here just yet. Tommy George left him at the Bore, and pushed on to tell you. Well, I'm glad I shall see Tre-

gaskiss before I leave. I was meaning to go back to Darra-Darra to-morrow.'

She said not a word. When he looked at her, he saw that her chest was heaving slightly, and her eyes bright with restrained tears.

'Clare,' he said softly, putting out his hand and touching hers as it lay on the edge of the hammock, 'don't fret; things aren't worth it.'

'You don't understand,' she answered huskily.

'Yes, I do—utterly; anyhow, I understand much better than you think. But you can't alter facts or temperaments. You cannot make a fine steel instrument do the work of a fencer's augur. All you can do is to harden yourself to things and to accept life as it is. If you are disappointed at not finding appreciation where you have a right to look for it, take the right, which is morally yours, to accept it from elsewhere. Yes; you must harden yourself to the inevitable.'

'Haven't I been doing that for ten years?'

'Outwardly, yes; but within there have been ravening wolves. Oh, I know it is all

very well to give advice; it's like saying there is no hurt when one is racked with pain. Do you suppose my heart hasn't bled for you these days? God knows I'd give the best part of my life if I could only make things different for you.'

'Don't—don't!' she gasped hysterically; 'I can't bear it. You couldn't imagine what it is to live always like that. It seems worse when one has been free for a little while.'

'Yes—yes. Indeed I know.'

'I can stand it better after it has gone on day by day for months; but when it comes fresh—the smell of brandy—I hate him to kiss me! And then—he gets angry——'

She stopped and turned away her face.

'Oh, I know; it is horrible!' A thought struck him. 'Tell me—his temper is bad. Has he ever—is he ever violent to you?'

'Violent?'

'I mean, has he ever ill-used you, struck you—that kind of thing?'

'No, not personal violence. He has been rough, but he is sorry afterwards. Why do you ask?'

'I was wondering. If it were a question—you know there are causes for which the law gives an ill-used wife her freedom.'

'I know. But there could be no question of that. Don't speak of it.'

They were both silent. The words they had spoken to each other marked an immense leap in their intimacy. They had before discussed Tregaskiss' increasing habit of inebriety, which month after month, week by week, had in the last two years gained a stronger hold on him.

'I have done all I can,' she said. 'I have begged, implored, reasoned — everything. But it doesn't seem to be of the least use, and I think my speaking of it at times makes him almost hate me. Then, there is something I learned not very long ago, quite by accident—he had always kept it from me. His father died of drink. I believe that a curse of that kind is often hereditary. I wish I didn't; it makes me'—she lowered her voice, and her pained eyes glanced towards him for a moment—'it makes me frightened for the children. I dread their coming; I prayed—yes, I *prayed* that this one might be

born dead. Ought I to be punished for that? Or else, if it had to be, I wanted it to be a boy. Life is always harder for women. Oh,' she went on passionately, 'such things shouldn't be allowed! Marriage is awful—it is wicked—when it's a marriage like mine!'

'I entirely agree with you. But you must not distress yourself about the idea of hereditary tendency. You have told me of the slight sunstroke he had. That often causes a want of self-control. I wish you could persuade him that he is not well, and get him to consult me. I might be able to do something—for the moment, at any rate—to make things easier for you.'

'He is so strong; he glories in his strength; it would be difficult to persuade him. It isn't fair to trouble you so,' she exclaimed. 'Why should you worry about me and mine?'

'Because I love you,' he answered, with perfect calmness, not moving in the least towards her or touching her hand again, only looking at her full, with a sudden lightening and glowing of his eyes.

She met the look, her own eyes deepening

and held by his. It was a long gaze, and he read in it all he wanted to know. Presently she drew herself back with a slight shudder.

'You ought not to have said that. You must never say it again.'

'I will not,' he answered. 'I will never say it till you tell me that I may. But I wanted you to know it. I wanted you to understand that there is nothing you could ask of me—nothing—which it would not be a joy and a privilege to me to do.'

He got up and walked to the veranda railing without another word. There he stood for several minutes looking out upon the plain.

'I see your husband coming,' he said. 'I will go out and meet him, and explain your illness to him and why I am here.'

His self-possession gave her confidence, and his reticence appealed to her as no words could have done. Her own pulses were tingling, and her heart seemed to leap and throb in an agony of happiness. It was so terrible, this thing that had befallen her, but it was heavenly sweet.

'Oh, I do love him!' she said, in a whisper to herself. 'I do love him with all my soul!'

The revelation had come to her with a shock, and yet with a sense of half-conscious foreknowledge. It was all clear now, and she understood the power this man had exercised over her from the very first. Looking back, it seemed to her that she had loved him from the moment in which she had opened her eyes from her swoon in the inn at Cedar Hill, and had seen the strong lined face, with its eagle look and piercing gaze, bent over her.

She knew now what made her speak out to him about herself, as she never spoke to any other human being; understood now her vague jealousy of Helen Cusack; knew why the burden of her marriage and her motherhood had of late seemed more intolerable. It was only Nature speaking, and Nature's eternal and unconquerable law defying the creed of conventions. The truth flashed upon her in a moment. The quiet masterfulness of his abrupt yet composed declaration had given her no time for analysis, self-reproach, or indignation. He had not even

asked her if she loved him. He had demanded nothing in return for his love. He had only told her of it that she might not scruple to make use of him in any way that she pleased. There was nothing to make her alarmed or angry, nothing which did not cause him to stand out in her imagination as a very knight of chivalry. Angry with him! When he had brought and laid at her feet that which all her life she had held as almost too sacred for common earth—that which she and Gladys had so mistakenly renounced as an ideal impossible of realization. Though she had bidden him never speak those words again, they would make music in her heart for evermore—'I love you! I love you!'

She was essentially a pure woman, notwithstanding the struggles in her of latent capacity for passion. The thought of unfaithfulness to her husband did not occur to her—unfaithfulness in the material sense; of spiritual infidelity there could be none, for the spiritual bond had never existed.

As she lay back in her hammock bathed in this stream of beatitude which flowed over her whole being, she forgot everything but

the one blessed and glorious fact that had come into her life and transfigured it. She forgot that her bondage was still upon her, that her husband would be with her in a few moments, and that his children and hers were welcoming him home.

The sun was setting ; the storm-clouds had spread higher, and looked lurid from the red reflection. Ning's voice sounded below, then Tregaskiss' shout, 'Hullo, Pickaninny!' and with it Clare awakened to reality.

She got out of the hammock, and was standing uncertainly, flushed and agitated, when her husband's heavy step sounded on the veranda-stair, and presently he was beside her. Geneste had remained below.

'Well, Clare,' he said, 'how are you? Geneste tells me you've had a touch of fever. I don't believe there can have been much the matter. By Jove! you have got quite a colour. I never saw you looking better.'

He put his big, red hands on her shoulder and kissed her in a rough, perfunctory sort of way. She was oddly struck by a certain curious difference in the manner of his caress. She could not have defined wherein it lay,

but was conscious of it, as a woman is intuitively conscious of any variation in the mood towards her of her life companion, whether the companionship be congenial or the reverse. The old thrill of repulsion deepened in her with the whiff of stale brandy in his breath. She was sure he had been drinking rather heavily.

His handsome face was red and puffy, his eyes bloodshot, and there was more than the usual want of nicety in his dress and appearance which confirmed the impression. His voice, too, had an indescribable thickness, and in his manner there was a suppressed irritability mingled with something roistering, a characteristic accentuated now to a greater degree than was customary.

'What has Geneste been doing here all this time?' he asked sharply; and she winced under the fierce gleam of his eyes. He noticed the sign of discomposure. 'It's all nonsense about his doctoring you. I don't believe in that sort of thing.'

'What do you mean?' she asked resentfully.

'He could have doctored you and gone

back again. Lots of people have fever and go about just the same, except when the shakes are on them. And fellows have been talking—sniggering, and making remarks. I'm not going to stand that sort of thing. It isn't as if he was in regular practice. The butchers going up Ilganda way started the story of his coming over; and Cusack, with his d——d impudence, chaffed me about leaving you to be sick-nursed by a good-looking bachelor doctor conveniently ready to turn up on an emergency.'

'Is that why you came home?'

'I came home to see how you were, and to send Geneste about his business. I don't choose him to be hanging round making love to my wife, doctor or no doctor! He is not such a tremendous saint, as they could tell you further North.'

She reddened, but restrained the indignant impulse to contradict him.

'It's beastly cheek,' Tregaskiss went on. 'I was very much annoyed at his way of speaking to me just now. Seemed to imply that I had been to blame. Does he suppose I am going to stand still and have my

property destroyed, without stirring a hand to prevent it? He'd sing a different tune if the strikers had attacked him instead of me.'

Tregaskiss fumed for some minutes longer. In a calmer mood it might have been evident to her that his dissatisfaction had its rise partly in jealousy, partly in self-reproach. His bluster was an excuse to himself for his own neglect. She stood still, silent, a rush of conflicting emotions torturing her. She was inwardly shame-stricken, indignant, choked with a feeling of passionate aversion from her husband, all the keener because the accusation had not been unfounded, and she was unable to stand forth and contemptuously repudiate it. For it was true that Geneste had told her he loved her. But that he 'had made love to her'! No; that he had not done, would never do. She had a sense of outrage—her Holy of Holies had been desecrated. A vulgar insulting construction had been put upon what to her was sacred. She had had the same kind of feeling to a lesser degree in other and minor matters when her finer self had come into contact with Tregas-

kiss' coarser personality. Now the feeling gained a new acuteness from the sanctity of the emotion upon which he was trampling. And yet her conscience did not absolve her.

She said at last, in a studiously quiet voice:

'If you want to know whether I have been ill or not, you have only to ask Mrs. Ramm—Dr. Geneste rode all the way and back to their camp one night to fetch her. It is his care which has probably saved me from a bad bout of fever. You will remember that when he came over I was alone, except for the Chinamen and Claribel and 'Gusta. Not even Mr. Shand was here. That was why he stayed. As to—the other part. I have nothing to say. I think you have exaggerated Mr. Cusack's chaff, which could not have been meant as you put it. I think Dr. Geneste intends to go back to Darra-Darra to-morrow. Please, Keith, for your own sake as well as for mine, do not be rude to him, for he has done us both a great kindness, and I am sure you would be sorry afterwards, if you offended him.'

She walked past Tregaskiss into her own room, without waiting for him to reply. Then she became terrified lest he should follow her ; but he did not come. Something down below attracted his attention, and he yelled out a reprimand to one of the black-boys and presently went noisily down the stairs. By-and-by she heard him in the back-veranda asking Geneste quite good-humouredly to come and have a 'nip' before dinner. His anger had been only bluster, and she need not have alarmed herself. Tregaskiss, like most bullies, was a moral coward.

Ning came in fresh from her bath to have her white frock and red sash fastened. She exhibited a new doll which Daddy had brought her from Ilganda, and which, she told her mother, Miss Lawford had dressed for her. The last piece of information gave Clare a clue as to Tregaskiss' delayed return, and she understood that he had been finding an excuse for himself by blaming her. She felt too contemptuous to be greatly annoyed. From Tregaskiss' own reports to her of earlier conversations with the little governess,

she knew that Miss Lawford permitted a freedom of flirtation which amused her husband, and made him admire the young lady as 'a jolly little woman with no stupid starch in her.' It had never occurred to her that Miss Lawford's influence could prove dangerous to her own. She dressed for dinner, holding back the hysterical sobs which rose in her throat, and mentally flying from the vague terror with which the situation impressed her. And yet all through her dressing her mind was pervaded by the thought that Geneste's eyes would meet hers for the first time since he had told her that he loved her, and that for the first time, too, in her life she must play a part abhorrent to her nature—that of a wife, with a secret love for another man to conceal.

Geneste pitied her intensely when she appeared and took her place before the tea-tray. He saw how pale she was, and with what an effort she kept her composure. He avoided looking at her, or addressing her too directly, but vigorously sustained conversation with Tregaskiss and Shand, asking about the sale to the butchers, particulars of

the strike, the doings of the Pastoralist Committee, and the arrival of the 'specials' from Port Victoria.

There appeared to be a good deal of talk and preparation on both sides, with little to show for it in the way of cause or result. The strikers were reported to have collected in a body for the destruction of various stations and for summary vengeance upon the free labourers; but as yet, beyond trying to fire two wool-sheds and the slaughter of Tregaskiss' horses, had done no definite mischief.

'They are afraid to tackle Brinda Plains just yet,' said Tregaskiss, 'for old Cusack is in such a blue funk that he has a force of police round the place, and makes all his men sleep on the veranda, ready with their firearms. You should hear Miss Lawford's account; it's rich, I can tell you.'

'Miss Lawford is staying with the Ococks, I hear,' said Geneste.

'Oh, I see you know all the Brinda Plains gossip,' cried Tregaskiss boisterously. 'The fair Helen, I suppose, keeps you well posted in their news. By Jove! you

know, she'll be thinking herself neglected for Mrs. Tregaskiss, if you don't take care.'

Clare's face was stony, and Geneste took no notice of the insinuation, but pointedly turned the conversation to general topics. Tregaskiss' geniality had a touch of malignancy. Geneste also noticed the change in his manner, and attributed it to the deepening effect of Miss Lawford's society. Tregaskiss was one of those men who cannot under any circumstances resist talking of the women they admire. He repeated more than one of Miss Lawford's sallies, proclaiming that she was splendid company, and that the Land Commissioner was tremendously gone upon her, but hadn't the ghost of a chance, for Miss Lawford liked a man who was a man and had some 'go' in him; she wasn't one of your die-away women, always giving themselves airs of superiority.

There was a certain aggressiveness in his tone, and as he spoke he glanced at his wife. It was the 'two-can-play-at-that-game' air of a schoolboy who attacks first to prevent himself from being taken vengeance upon.

Tregaskiss' methods were all of the elementary kind.

They sat out on the veranda, but Clare gave herself no opportunity for a word apart with Geneste, nor did he appear to ask any.

The baby cried, and she went to her room and sat with it on her lap, conscientiously hushing it and guarding it from the mosquitoes till it slept again, all the time with bitterness and revolt in her heart, and yet a remorseful tenderness for the small helpless thing which was bone of her bone, and which she could not cast from her, living symbol though it was of a bondage she loathed. When she went back, the night had grown still and muggy; the clouds had blackened, and there were flashes of sheet-lightning gleaming at intervals in the west.

'It means nothing,' Geneste was saying as she approached. 'These storms which don't come off are a bad sign.'

'We shall have to begin watering the cattle if it goes on,' said Tregaskiss; 'and that means extra hands, and no end of expense and worry.'

'They're dying fast out Brigalow Flat

way,' put in Shand. 'Another drought like last year will ruin the district.'

'And the squatters into the bargain,' growled Tregaskiss.

'Well, anyhow,' said Geneste, 'you are luckier than I am, Tregaskiss, for you have got one Bore at least to fall back upon.'

How could he talk so quietly, when for her the very air was full of stress and thrill, and when her heart was breaking under the strain of the position? And yet she admired him for his calmness, which she assured herself must come from the very loftiness of his motive.

He meant only her good, and desired nothing but the right to help her as unselfishly as he could. Surely, she herself must be a creature of evil thoughts and wishes to be so weighed down and tossed and tormented!

'Mrs. Tregaskiss,' Geneste said, turning to her, 'you should remember you are only an invalid yet, and ought not to sit up late. I shall have to say good-bye when I bid you good-night, for I am starting home very early to-morrow morning.'

'Good-night, then, and good-bye!' she said, holding out her hand.

He took it, and all that night his touch seemed to linger with her like a living thing.

'Good-night!' he said. 'I am very much obliged to you for having had me so long, and I shall leave feeling more comfortable about you than when I came. I think you are pretty safe now from bad days.'

Clare answered with a commonplace. He had been very kind. She hoped that he would not find station-work had been neglected during his absence.

'Oh no; I've got a very good stockman. Tregaskiss, you won't forget that you are to bring Mrs. Tregaskiss over the first opportunity to see my diggings? It would be capital if we could manage the expedition to Eungella at the same time.'

Tregaskiss agreed. He didn't see why they shouldn't do it before the worst heat had come on; and they might get Helen Cusack and Miss Lawford to join the picnic, as well as Gillespie and Blanchard and the lot of them.

'Can I get you a lamp, or a candle, or

anything ?' Geneste asked formally, as Clare was turning to her part of the house.

'No, thank you; I have a lamp in my room,' she answered; and so they parted.

The night was ghastly, the storm ending in wind and dust, with low rumblings of thunder and faint flashes of lightning.

Clare lay awake, every nerve strained, waiting for her husband's entrance.

When he came at last, she pretended to be asleep; but she could hear him heavily fumbling with his clothes and boots as he undressed, and she stealthily crept to the very edge of the bed, holding herself quite still till he should be asleep, so that she might get up and go out to the hammock in the veranda. She did this many nights.

CHAPTER XVII.

'FAIR INES.'

'WHAT am I to do about Gladys Hilditch?' Clare said one day to her husband.

'Let her find her own way up from Port Victoria,' he answered crossly. 'She is rich, and can afford to pay for a buggy and pair of horses.'

'Keith, wouldn't it be possible for you to go and fetch her?'

'Not if I know it. I've got neither time nor horses. You seem to forget that we are ordered to keep ten horses in the paddock in case of the specials wanting them, and that every squatter must have a horse and man in readiness to give an alarm if necessary. Mrs. Hilditch can wait till the strike is over.'

'I can't believe in the strike, or get up any proper sense of our danger,' said Clare, with a laugh that annoyed Tregaskiss. 'The Unionists seem only trying to frighten the squatters. They say Mr. Cusack is nearly over his shearing and is getting his wool loaded, and nothing has happened.'

'You wait and see!' oracularly replied Tregaskiss. 'Other people in the district don't take things so easily.'

'Well, at any rate, here's Mr. Chance, who hasn't troubled to get in his ten horses, or to ask the specials to look after his station,' said Clare, turning to Cyrus Chance, who, during one of his periodic stoppages on his way to Port Victoria, was present in the veranda while the colloquy took place.

'I'm not one to get scared at a screech, Mistress Tregaskiss,' said old Cyrus grimly. 'The strikers know that, and they know, too, that if they burn down my wool-shed, I'd buy up every lawyer in Leichardt's Land to have the law of them, just as I mean to do to get off my black-boy Andy.'

'Andy?' repeated Tregaskiss. 'Murdered one of his tribe, didn't he? I hear the police

caught him up Brinda way and chained him to a tree in the paddock; but he got loose, and they say some white man must have undone his handcuffs.'

'Ay!' returned Chance. 'It's true there was a white man camped close by Brinda Creek that night, and he did undo Andy's handcuffs. I'm a hard man, Mistress Tregaskiss, and a gripper on the whites, as they say up here; but I've never held with hunting down the blacks and making laws for them when they've got their own tribe laws to do the work. Andy killed the other black because he had taken away his gin, and that's his affair, say I, and not Queen Victoria's.'

Tregaskiss laughed.

'You've got a nipping way of putting things, Chance.'

'It's likely that I have, Mister Tregaskiss' —Chance studiously made use of the prefix— 'but I've studied the subject of colonization, and I've no opeenion of Britishers, when they get the upper hand of savages. As far as that goes, I may be a gripper right enough, and my heirs will be the better for it. But I never wronged white nor black, and I've

made up my mind to get Andy off if I pay for it with all my Leura property. I don't like folks that go after other men's wives, no more than I like folks that, having wives of their own, go sweethearting other young ladies—of a sort.'

The contempt of Mr. Chance's 'of a sort' pointed the allusion. Tregaskiss reddened angrily.

'It's pretty safe on the Leura, where you haven't got to put your theories into practice, for a fellow to maintain, like that speechifying chap at Ilganda, that the squatters have taken the blacks' country, and are bound to kill a bullock for them every now and then. I'd like to see you killing the bullock, Chance. And that reminds me—we're very much obliged to you for your present to my wife the other day. Six bottles of porter. By Jove! that was a magnificent shell-out for you, Chance—quite the millionaire touch, eh? But I think I can afford to buy her her drinks.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Mr. Tregaskiss,' said Chance, his small whitey-brown face turning pale with suppressed anger. 'I'm glad to

hear you are in such a flourishing condition. There are reports going—perhaps you mayn't have heard them—about the Bank being ready to come down on Mount Wombo, and I'm pleased, for your wife's sake, to know that there's no truth in them. I think I'll say good-day now, Mistress Tregaskiss. Good-day to you, Mr. Tregaskiss. I'll not trespass upon your hospitality by sitting in your veranda any longer.'

'Don't hurry,' said Tregaskiss sulkily. 'I'm off, and since you won't be neighbourly and take anything——'

'No, I thank you, Mr. Tregaskiss; I've got my damper and junk at the camp; but if you've got a bit of greenhide rope to spare, I'll be pleased to buy it from you, for a halter for one of my pack-horses, at the market price, Mr. Tregaskiss—at the market price.'

'Your price is always a goodish bit below the market one, Chance; and I could afford to let you have that for nothing. But since you are so beastly proud, you can pay what you please. You'll find me out by the meat-store when you are ready.' And he went off.

'Your husband seems to be more prosperous than folks on the Leura give him credit for, Mistress Tregaskiss,' said the old man, eyeing her keenly. 'It surprises me, for money isn't like a boomerang; it doesn't come back after you have thrown it away; and times are bad.'

Clare looked uncomfortable.

'Please don't mind what Keith says, Mr. Chance, or take him too literally.'

'No, I don't—no, I don't do that,' said Chance, with a chuckle. 'If I had, he'd have done me in the eye before now. He don't like me, nor I him.'

'Well, at any rate, Mr. Chance, you and I will always be good friends.'

'Yes, that we'll be. And mind you what I said to you last time I was here. Nurse your babies, and turn 'em into blessings; and remember this, I've formed my own opeenions, and I keep my mouth shut on 'em. You needn't be afraid to tell me if you're in a bit of a tight place. I wasn't thinking in the way of money,' he added cautiously.

'No; I know you weren't, and I shall remember. I'm rather in trouble now.

My friend Gladys Hilditch is at Port Victoria, and you heard what Keith said, and I am wondering if you could help me any way to get her up here. Perhaps Mr. Cusack, or Mr. Carmody, or somebody from one of the stations, may be down, and would bring her part of the way, anyhow. I can't tell you how obliged I'd be if you would see and ask them for me.'

'Gladys Hilditch—Gladys Hilditch,' repeated Chance slowly, with his queer intonation dwelling on the name. 'That's the one I called "Fair Ines," isn't it? She comes from the West. "To dazzle when the sun's gone down," eh? I know—I know. Well, I'm not much in the way of womenkind, Mistress Tregaskiss. I hate the lot of them, and I never knew a lady, so to speak, till I came across you. I've sometimes thought I may have missed something, but it's too late now. "Fair Ines!" I'll see if I can do anything for you, Mistress Tregaskiss, but I won't engage to go nigh the creature myself.'

He departed with this doubtful promise, upon which, nevertheless, Clare placed some reliance. Sure enough, a little later two

riders might have been seen one afternoon at sunset, approaching through the gidia clearing, followed by a pair of black-boys driving several pack-horses, and one of the riders was a lady, quite unlike any of the Leura ladies, and the other was Cyrus Chance.

Nona, the black gin, who was scout to the establishment, ran up to tell the news.

'Mine think it that cobbon budgery, White Mary,' was Nona's announcement. 'Altogether lady, that fellow. No jump-up fellow like some Leura lady.' Which showed that Nona was a savage of discrimination in social matters.

It was Gladys Hilditch—Gladys looking like a queen in exile, or a Burne-Jones picture of a mediæval lady on horseback, minus the feathers; but for the absence of these Mrs. Hilditch amply atoned by a cunning arrangement of gauze upon her picturesque, broad-brimmed hat. Gladys was nothing if not picturesque, and she always had the knack of wearing original, becoming, and suitable garments, sufficiently different from those of anybody else to give her dis-

tinction and marked individuality. Any other Englishwoman would have appeared in ordinary English riding dress, but Gladys' gray habit, her coat, which was a suggestion from the Louis Quinze period, her fine batiste shirt, frilled with point de Paris, and curved cavalier hat, were a sort of incarnation of all South Kensington and Tite Street culture dropped suddenly into Leura barbarism. She was a very beautiful woman, more beautiful now than in the old days, for during her married life, when she had had money in plenty and little else to distract her—in the early part of it, at any rate—she had brought the art of dressing herself to perfection. Her face was Greek in type, only less statuesque, and with the curving-back lips and slightly hollowed eye orbits which, according to latter-day pictures, would seem to belong rather to the days of chivalry.

She did not look in the least dusty or dishevelled, though she had ridden all day over the scorching plains. Her reddish-yellow hair was parted upon her forehead, and crinkled as evenly as though it had just been arranged by a skilful hairdresser. Her

delicate skin, smooth as the leaf of a flower, was not burned or roughened; her eyes, deep violet, limpid, and large, were undimmed by fatigue; her thin gray habit was immaculate, her batiste unruffled, and the little etceteras of her toilet—her double eyeglass, with its long handle of dull silver, her gray gauntlet gloves, the silver button fastening her coat—all seemed truly in keeping with the suggestion of a 'Fair Ines' come to dazzle a more primitive race.

Seeing Clare hurrying from the upper veranda, she jumped down from her horse, not waiting for anyone to help her, and, pulling off her gauntlets, rubbed her rose-petal cheeks lightly with a filmy handkerchief that exhaled a suggestion only of some rare and particularly refined perfume, and was in the arms of her friend.

'Dearest Clare!'

'Oh, Gladys!'

'How thin you've grown, Clare!'

'And you—how young you look, Gladys! And not a bit ill.'

'Oh, I am quite well now; and, dear, remember I was two years younger than you.

I'm only just thirty, and I've kept myself in cotton-wool.'

'And you are thinking I have not done so. Am I so terribly changed, Gladys?'

Gladys stood away and took a long gaze before she replied.

'Yes—no. Yes, of course, you Sphinx. You've got a look more—more—never mind, I'll explain when I've made it out. You are handsomer than you used to be, if that's what you want to know, though you are so thin; but it suits you. You look like—like—Sarah Bernhardt—subtile and suggestive—that's it! Well, subtilty is what we are all trying for in these days,' Gladys went on, in her soft, sweet monologue, 'so you should be satisfied. As for me, I'm sick of it. I've been done to death with modernity and all the rest. I've rushed out here to be rid of it; but if you are going to come Ibsen's heroines over me, I give things up. I was feeling quite enchanted with it all—the gum-trees and the niggers and this sort of thing.' She gave a comprehensive wave of her hand. 'It's a mixture of Miss Wilkins' New England stories and the "Roman d'un Spahi." I've

been asking that delightful specimen of an Australian man how it's managed. He's a bit of Miss Wilkins himself—only better.'

She indicated with a little nod of her head Cyrus Chance, who was standing by the pack-horse he had been leading, watching her with an odd smile on his grotesque face. He looked more odd and fusty than ever, and his slight deformity more noticeable.

'Mr. Chance,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss, awakening to the fact of his existence, 'how am I to thank you? This is a great surprise. I never dreamed that you would bring my friend to me yourself.'

'Oh, he wouldn't have done it if I hadn't insisted,' exclaimed Gladys; 'and he wouldn't have consented then, but that I threatened to unpack my Rosalind costume—I played her once in one of the pastoral plays, dear, modelled after Ada Rehan—and ride after him with the cowboys, or stockmen, or whatever you call them. He said that wouldn't be becoming in an English lady. I told him that Mary Stuart had done it before me, and that she was a good precedent. But he doesn't approve of Mary Stuart; she wasn't

domestic enough to please him. He declares she murdered Bothwell. We had quite an argument over the Casket letters. To think of his having gone into the Casket letters business! Then I quoted the Empress Theodora, but he was horrified at my having read Gibbon. Fancy his knowing Gibbon! He says he educated himself on Bohn's Library and cheap literature. He is a perfect type. And he hates women! I never in all my life came across a misogynist before. I am determined that he shall not hate me, for I like him immensely; and so I am going to reform him, and I shall let him try and reform me. I settled it for him on the way along. He wouldn't talk to me at first—wanted me to ride behind, between him and the black boys—but I said that, if he was going to be disagreeable, I should get down and unpack my Rosalind dress and put it on, and that finished the argument.'

Gladys poured forth her rapid monologue in the sweetest, softest of voices, with a touch of disdainful languor in her tone, which relieved her sprightly utterances of any flippancy. Perhaps one of her charms lay in

the contrast between her modern and somewhat redundant talk and the angelic dignity of her face and movements. Nothing about her went fast except her tongue, and, nevertheless, Clare knew she would have long fits of taciturnity when, as she declared, her mind was kneading an idea.

'Oh, Gladys,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss, 'you have not changed a bit!'

'Dear! yes, I have. Just wait till you get to know. I've been through the mill, and I've come out of it a good deal scratched, but so hardened and brightened up that you don't see the scratches for a while. I dare say I seem frivolous at present. But this is all so enchantingly new and crude. I've enjoyed myself ever since I left conventionality, in the shape of my maid Parker, behind at Cedar Hill, sitting on my dress-basket with cotton-wool in her ears to keep out the swearing of the bullock-drivers. If you had seen her face when they brought in the saddle-bags, and I told her to pack my clothes in them! Parker is going to be a trial. I told her to find her own way to Port Victoria and back to England if she liked, for she is far too grand for her sur-

roundings. Mother and Cassandra would have had a fit at Cedar Hill. The mosquito curtains and the wall-papers would have finished them. They never get beyond the Æsthetics, and have no notion of dramatic contrast. Now, I was always dramatic—even when I married Mr. Hilditch.'

Cassandra was the eldest Miss Waraker, who told fortunes by the stars, and was generally romantic and superior.

They were in the drawing-room now, and Clare was taking off Gladys' hat and veil and giving her tea, while Ning stared with big, solemn eyes at the visitor.

'You are a queer little imp,' said Gladys, catching the child up and kissing her. 'I wish I had one like you.'

She gave a sigh, and her astonishingly young face seemed for a moment to grow as old as its years. Clare had heard that the one child of Gladys' marriage had died as a baby, and pressed her friend's hand sympathetically, saying nothing. Mr. Chance's shuffling footsteps sounded on the veranda, and presently he came in carrying two great bulging saddlebags, with the French heel of one kid shoe

and the buckled toe of another peeping out at the aperture beneath the flap. He deposited these on the floor, and stood looking at Mrs. Hilditch with a sort of saturnine tenderness. 'Fair Ines' had come and conquered, and old Cyrus had found the embodiment of his romantic dreams in this dainty creature from a world he knew not.

'I'm thinking,' he said, 'that I'd better be getting down to my camp.'

'Oh, Mr. Chance,' cried Clare, 'don't go yet! Have some of my tea—and, besides, I haven't half thanked you for bringing me my friend. I don't think I'll try; you can see what a pleasure you have given me.'

The muscles about old Cyrus's mouth relaxed into an expression of benevolence.

'Didn't I tell you,' he answered, 'that ye might apply to me in a difficulty—short of a money one—and I'd see what I could do for you?'

'I don't think much of you if you wouldn't help in a money difficulty,' said Gladys.

'It's an ill business to beg, to borrow, or to steal,' said old Cyrus sententiously.

'Oh, he's a miser, isn't he?' said Gladys

boldly. 'That's what they told me at Cedar Hill. And he's enormously rich, and could buy us all out and have a decent competence over. Isn't that so?'

'To buy *us* out wouldn't be saying a great deal,' answered Mrs. Tregaskiss. 'To buy you out, Gladys, would be a different matter.'

'My husband left me five thousand a year,' said Mrs. Hilditch gravely; 'and if I marry again I lose every penny of it.'

'Then take the advice of old man Chance, leddy, and keep your liberty and your siller. True enough, I'm a miser and a woman-hater, but I'd have been worse than that if I had given a woman the right to put her hand in my pocket, for I'd have been a beggar. No, thank you, Mistress Tregaskiss'—refusing Clare's proffered cup of tea; 'I'll be having it at the camp presently. Is the master on the place?'

'He went out on the run with Mr. Shand,' she answered; 'but he ought to be coming back. I think I hear the dogs barking.'

'Then I'll be saying good-night,' said Cyrus.

Gladys turned a puzzled look upon him.

'Mr. Tregaskiss isn't a *woman*,' she cried. 'Why do you want to run away from him? What does he mean by his camp, Clare? Does he prefer camping to sleeping in a house, or am I turning him out here?'

'Old man Cyrus Chance prefers to sleep and eat at his own expense,' put in Chance. 'I'm not saying that I don't take a meal off a neighbour's corn cobs or a pumpkin that would rot for want of gathering, but that's not a question of hospitality. Good-night, leddy. The rest of your pack is in the back veranda, and I hope you'll not find any of the gewgaws missing.'

'Listen!' said Gladys; 'when he knows that half of them are completely ruined, and that Parker would die at the sight of my crumpled tea-gowns! Two pairs of my best silk stockings are ornamenting the gum-trees, and the Valenciennes frills of my petticoats torn to shreds and strewing the plain. The pack-horse put down his head and kicked up his legs, and then bolted. Away went the pack, and the black-boys gathered up the fragments.'

'Silk gowns, and fripperies, and fal-lals, the

like of which was never seen on the Leura,' said Mr. Chance. 'You are a deal too fine for these parts, leddy. But I would not have it altered. You're good to look at, and not to be confounded with the ordinary, and your finery is just a part of yourself.'

'Hear him! I'm converting him already. Mr. Chance, have you forgotten that I'm a woman?'

'Eh! but you and Mistress there are a different brand from those other creatures of women, and not to be drafted into the same yard. I don't count you as women.'

'That's the prettiest compliment I've ever had paid me,' returned Gladys, and she held out her hand to him with such royal grace that old Cyrus was obliged to take it, and perform a very awkward bow in doing so over her outstretched fingers.

'Where's your camp going to be, Mr. Chance?' she asked.

'Agen the water-hole, close by the Blacks; they're good company for me. I've got Andy off, Mistress, and it cost me a pretty penny.'

Clare gave him her congratulations.

'Then, I shall come down after dinner—or tea. I observe that all meals are tea here; and we'll have another game of knucklebones,' said Gladys.

'Knucklebones?' repeated Mrs. Tregaskiss.

'It's his favourite dissipation. Haven't you discovered that? He has got the loveliest set. I've always longed to play knucklebones, and last night, when we were camping out, he taught me. I had some trouble to persuade him that it was not derogatory to my dignity as a woman.'

'A woman!' grunted Cyrus, with an accent of contempt. 'Haven't I said I did not count you? They don't know your brand up here.'

'A goddess, then—without the pedestal. I have no objection, Mr. Chance, to being a goddess, since you decline to play knucklebones with ordinary mortals.'

'Well, anyhow,' said Cyrus, 'it's an innocent pastime, and takes skill, and it's cheap.'

'And classic,' added Gladys. 'The Pompeiians played knucklebones. I've seen the sets—beauties, nearly eighteen hundred years

old—in the museum at Naples. You may disapprove of Mary Stuart, and the Empress Theodora, and Gibbon, and the rest of your cheap literature people; but you can't trample on the Pompeiians—poor, petrified corpses—they are too pathetic.'

The sounds of arrival outside became distinct. Clare Tregaskiss' still smile might have been carved in marble.

'This is Keith,' she said.

'Keith?' repeated Gladys. 'Oh, I forgot—your husband's name. I like it. I'm longing to see him. It wasn't kind of you, Clare, to meet, marry, and go off with him that year I was away.' Gladys began to walk about the room, looking out now and then over the plain through the French windows, inspecting the South Sea Island things, and chattering all the time. 'I've often pictured to myself the kind of man for whom you save up the joys of civilization. Tall and stately, brave, simple, tender, intellectual, of course; scorning the falsehoods and insincerity of society that you used to hold forth against; a sort of Nature's king; a strong man, carving his course like a river,

and making everybody in this wild, queer country — whites and blacks — respect and admire him. Yes, I knew what he would be like. And now I see that I was quite right.'

At her last words old Cyrus, who had edged towards the front-veranda, realizing that an exit by the back would bring him face to face with Tregaskiss, paused and stood still, an expression of grim astonishment on his features. Gladys was peering out at the doorway giving upon the yard, and was taking stock of the newcomer. Chance and Clare both moved near her, and glanced over her shoulder at the figure of a tall man standing by his horse and unstrapping his valise. Chance gave a queer little ejaculation, and Clare's lips tightened, but she said nothing and turned away. It was Geneste!

In a moment he was at the door, confronting Gladys. She held out her hand, her beautiful face beaming, and in her manner a mixture of the sweetest dignity and friendliness.

I don't need any introduction to Clare's

husband. I can quite understand her not regretting the English life. I hope you will welcome her old friend for her sake.'

'Gladys,' Clare interposed, 'I ought to have told you. This is not my husband. It is our neighbour, Dr. Geneste.' She went forward with outstretched hand. 'How do you do? We were expecting Keith. Let me introduce you to Mrs. Hilditch.'

Geneste made his greetings becomingly, and Gladys laughed at her mistake. But there was an awed, almost terrified, look in her eyes. Clare's composure had been admirable, but Gladys' perceptions were keen.

When Tregaskiss arrived half an hour later, Mrs. Hilditch was in her room, unpacking the saddle-bags, and otherwise preparing herself for dinner. Clare was with her, and their first intimation of the master's coming was not altogether an agreeable one. Tregaskiss was in an ill-humour; he had seen his cattle dying, bogged in the fast-emptying water-holes; he had had a longer ride than either Mr. Shand or his wife guessed, and not after stock. On his way home there had been a stormy encounter

with the drover of some travelling stock, and he had discovered that a good deal of grass had been destroyed by a Bush fire.

Tommy George, who came out to take his horse, was suspected of being the cause of this last disaster, through having carelessly thrown away a burning match when lighting his pipe on the run. Tregaskiss attacked him, swore at him freely, ordered him to hand over his pipe, which he broke into fragments and threw at him, and gave Shand instructions that not another fig of tobacco was to be served to the black-boys for a month to come. He fumed on in loud, wrathful accents. His horse had a sore back, and Shand came in for a share of blame for not having seen to the stuffing of the saddle. One of the stockmen was waiting for rations. 'Oh, confound you!' said Tregaskiss; 'I'm dog-tired, and I'm not going to give out rations at this hour. You can stop till Mr. Shand has turned out the horses. Go after him to the yard and tell him. Or, here! Mrs. Tregaskiss will give them out. Clare!' he roared out. ''Gusta, go and ask your mistress to come out to the store.'

Clare did not wait for the further summons. She turned from her occupation of hanging up some of Gladys' dresses in the cretonne-curtained wardrobe.

'I will come back presently, Gladys,' she said.

'Yes. Stay—oh, Clare, was that—Mr. Tregaskiss?'

'That was my husband,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss stonily. 'You will find him, perhaps, a little different from what you expected—and from what he used to be, if Cassandra, who met him in England, ever described him to you; but you must remember that we lead a rough life, and he has been riding after cattle all day, and—and times are bad; and it is not surprising that he should be tired and a little irritable. Our cattle are dying for want of grass and water, and when you have been here a little while you will know what ruin a Bush fire may cause.'

Gladys said nothing. When Clare had gone, she sat down on the edge of the bed, and stared round her at the little veranda room, with its primitive shutters, its walls papered with pictures from the *Illustrated*

and *Graphic*, its home-made furniture, and sunken earthen floor, covered with rugs and matting, its rough washstand and dressing-table — on which Gladys' silver-backed brushes and array of toilet implements looked so incongruous—the canvas ceiling and the velvety patch of mosquitoes in one corner, waiting for darkness to leave their shelter. Gladys shuddered.

'It wouldn't matter a bit if it weren't for him,' she murmured. 'Oh, my poor Clare! my poor dear, dear Clare! Oh, what made you do it? And you love another man! Oh, is no one happy—no one in the whole world? Must one always love the wrong man?'

When Clare came back, which was not for a long time, Mrs. Hilditch was dressed, her beautiful hair rippling over her low forehead and coiled behind, with a mediæval-looking band of amethysts set in antique silver binding her head, and a like belt girding her loose muslin and Valenciennes lace robe. There was not much sign of widowhood about her, and she seemed to think it necessary to apologize for the fact.

'He has been dead fourteen months, dear, and I couldn't ever wear a cap. Oh, Clare,' she added, coming close to her friend and laying her hand on Clare's arm, while she gazed at her with earnest eyes, 'it is so terrible, so hideous, to be glad. But I tried to do my duty at the last—when he got ill. They said he couldn't have lived nearly so long if it hadn't been for me.'

'I know that. A man told me you were very good to him.'

Gladys withdrew her arm, and went back to the glass and adjusted a loose lock of her hair, before she answered. Clare had been wondering how she should broach the news of Blanchard's presence on the Leura. She now saw that it was no news to Gladys, and that chance had nothing to do with their proximity to each other.

'I know who that was,' Gladys answered, with studied quietness. 'There's only one man on the Leura who could know anything about me and my husband. It was Ambrose Blanchard.'

'I did not know his name was Ambrose,' said Clare. 'It was Mr. Blanchard who

recognised your photograph, and told me he had known you. He said that he had admired your goodness to—your husband.'

'I am glad,' said Gladys, 'that, at any rate, he did me that justice. Come, Clare, I like this little room immensely, dear. It puts me in mind of my cabin on board the *Nana Sahib*, only that it is a great deal larger and more comfortable; but I think the veranda would be a cooler place to sit in.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLARE'S VOW.

TREGASKISS, when he found out who his unseen auditress had been — Gladys informed him of the fact with perfect frankness, accepting his ill-temper as a matter of course, and asking him various sympathetic questions as to the working of the station and the probable result of the fire—did his best to remove the impression his rough language might have made.

'A fellow is bound to swear at these niggers and bullock-drivers, Mrs. Hilditch,' he remarked confidentially, 'and I'm delighted to see that you're not horrified at our Bush ways. It took me a long time to break Clare in'—he laughed his fatuous laugh—'but now I've got her in excellent order,

though she is still a little inclined to give herself airs; doesn't take the cheerful view of things that you do.' (Gladys had been giving a sprightly account of her experiences among the bullock-drivers at Cedar Hill, and of her night's camping.) 'I must say I admire a woman of spirit. Rum old stick, Cyrus Chance, isn't he? You must have played up to him in a remarkable way to get him to bring you along, or he may have done it out of affection to my wife. He's very fond of Clare; makes her presents occasionally;' and Tregaskiss told the story of the six bottles of porter, and Gladys began to understand Cyrus Chance's objection to breaking bread in his house. She began to understand, too, Clare's far-away smile.

'That's the explanation of her Sphinx look,' she said to herself. 'Oh, my poor, dear, dear Clare! Could he ever have been handsome, and frank, and attractive, as Cassandra described him? Perhaps in those days he hadn't taken to drinking whisky and grown red and coarse, and perhaps he was too much in awe of Clare, when she was

Miss Gardyne and went to London parties, to swear before her.'

Gladys had already gauged the situation, and Tregaskiss' character as well. She knew that a woman who had five thousand a year—as long as she did not marry again—must command his respect. He would, as far as his natural tendencies and the superior domination of whisky permitted, abstain from rough-and-ready language in her presence. Then her beauty and air of fashion awed him. Tregaskiss admired her immensely, though, as he confided to Shand and Geneste later, she was not altogether his style—put him too much in mind of ragged painters and the floppy artistic set. Tregaskiss always talked of London life as though he were intimately acquainted with its social intricacies. He had his manner of boisterous good humour this evening—rapidly assumed for Gladys' benefit—and chaffed Geneste about Helen Cusack, detailing the rumour he had heard in Ilganda of her engagement to young Gillespie. In worse taste he bantered his wife on her late need of Geneste's professional services.

'She doesn't look, does she, Mrs. Hilditch, as if there had been any reason to have a doctor standing over her night and day for more than a week? I told Clare when I came home that I hadn't seen her looking so well and young and handsome since she first arrived on the Leura.'

'I think she is still very handsome, certainly, Mr. Tregaskiss,' replied Gladys with boldness; 'but if you think she is looking well I don't agree with you. I should say she wanted a lot of nursing and taking care of.'

Geneste could not help giving her a grateful glance. He had been a little afraid of the coming of Gladys Hilditch. Now he felt sure of her sympathy.

She was a many-sided person, this young woman. In European society she was all that there is of the luxurious modern. Here on the Leura she showed a reaction in favour of barbarism, and declared that there was nothing she enjoyed so much as unadulterated Nature, and that she was thoroughly tired of London banalities. She was intensely interested in Bush life; wanted to know all

about the strike—she had come in at Cedar Hill for a demonstration against the free labourers, as the imported shearers from the South were called—inquired as to the large sheep-owners of the district, and, without once mentioning Ambrose Blanchard's name, contrived to get a good deal of information about the Cusacks and their household and dependents.

Her lively chatter covered the embarrassment which was now inseparable from any intercourse between Mrs. Tregaskiss and Geneste, when it took place under the eye of others. What an ignorant, provincial sort of woman she herself was, after all, Clare reflected bitterly, and how untrained in the ways of the world! Gladys she thought would have found in the situation only the piquancy of dramatic contrast. Every tone and gesture of this attractive lady seemed to indicate a perfect capacity for dealing with a shoal of contraband admirers. Blanchard's tone had suggested that her methods of distraction had not been altogether as admirable as East End visiting.

Dinner was over; they were all in the

veranda, and Tregaskiss was showing off Ning's accomplishments, and making her go through her last 'ghiribal,' which is the blacks' word for a song and dance representing the sound and action of some animal. Ning's ghiribal was of the wild musk duck, and her little arms flapped like wings and she puffed out her cheeks as she moved and sang in imitation of the duck's cry:

'Ya naiya naringa
Puanbu ni go!
Mingo ahikarai!
Whoogh!'

'Did you ever see such a pickaninny, Mrs. Hilditch?' her father cried, in boisterous delight.

Gladys was enchanted. Here was true local colour; here was unadulterated Nature. At last she found herself free from the asphyxiating influence of modern civilization. She, too, must learn a ghiribal. Tregaskiss made the child repeat her performance. He was at his best when playing with Ning, and Gladys began to dislike him less.

By-and-by Cyrus Chance's camp-fire glimmered in the distance beyond the cluster of

blacks' gunyas, and Gladys declared her intention of taking a moonlight stroll and paying him a visit. She did not ask Tregaskiss if he would escort her, an omission which made him sulky, and he retaliated on his wife by desiring her to remain and help him with his office work—that dreary business of writing down beneath the date all that had been done on the station that day: the number of cattle branded—if there were branding going on—the camps mustered, the rations given out. To-night Tregaskiss had more serious matters occupying him. The Bank had written him a letter of warning, and had issued a veiled threat of sending a representative to report on the station. There were inconvenient payments to be made—the store account at Ilganda, the fencers, and other items into which Tregaskiss did not enter in detail. It was a question of selling store cattle in order to raise money for immediate expenses; and the drought was threatening severely and the market was bad. Then he propounded a scheme which had occurred to him during dinner. Could Clare 'work her friend Mrs.

Hilditch,' as he phrased it—get her to make a loan, or buy a small share in Mount Wombo, and so furnish a supply of cash.

Clare recoiled. Impossible! She felt that she would almost rather starve. It would be easier to apply to Cyrus Chance, hopeless as would be the result. Tregaskiss upbraided her for lukewarmness as regarded his interests. She cared for nothing as long as she had her ease and could stay at home cooling herself in the veranda with her children; but she would feel differently when she no longer had a roof over her head, and so on. Clare gazed out into the night. The gaunt gum-trees and the ghostly gidias seemed to mock the very suggestion of freedom. To be roofless and alone! The very idea was like letting in a rush of fresh wind. The passion of futile longing that seized her seemed unbearable. She got up and paced the room. Though the window was open, there did not seem to be a breath of air; the hum of the mosquitoes was maddening, and the flying ants circled towards the lamp and dropped their wings on the table-cover. Tregaskiss leaned back in the office

chair smoking, and occasionally spitting through the open window. He, too, got up, and mixed himself a glass of spirits; he always kept it in the safe, where were the station ledgers and the strychnine for poisoning native dogs. Clare thought of Geneste and Gladys wandering by the lagoon; she wondered if he were telling Gladys of her wretchedness. No, he was too loyal for that; he would know that she could not bear to be pitied even by Gladys, just yet awhile. She had exchanged no word with Geneste, except that commonplace good-night, since those in which he had told her of his love, and she had bade him never speak of it again. Did he mean to take her altogether literally? He might have written to her. There had been an opportunity at the last coming of Jemmy Rodd. Perhaps he had been afraid that her husband would open the letter. Had he in truth meant those words—had he not perhaps repented them? Her heart was crying out and hungering to hear them repeated—that 'I love you.' And he had never asked her if she loved him back. Oh! if she could go to

him and put her head upon his breast and feel his arms round her, and say to him in his ear just once, as she had said to herself, 'I love you with all my soul.'

Tregaskiss' rasping voice roused her. 'That mine has turned out no good, and the others are just as likely as not to be rank sells. By God! I'm sick of the whole concern. I feel as if I wanted a jolly good spree with a pleasant companion, and to throw worries to the devil for a bit anyhow. What's the use of slaving and sweating to have the Bank down upon you and life to begin all over again? If it wasn't for the children—I declare to Heaven that, but for the pickaninny, if I could manage to make a lucky hit over one of those Wirra reefs, I'd cut the whole blessed business and never come back again. Don't stand like a stock there, Clare!' he cried out. 'Go out if you want to and find your fine friend. You're jealous, I suppose, lest she should be flirting with Geneste. Go on out. You're no good to me. If I'd had a different sort of wife I shouldn't feel as I feel to-night.'

She was moving away, but at the last

words came back to him. 'How do you feel, Keith? Tell me what is really the matter with you, and I'll do my best to help you. I don't believe it's all money difficulties. You seem to me to have utterly changed since you were away that week at Ilganda.'

'That's true enough,' he said moodily. 'I found out something then that I hadn't known before; and it has upset me, that's all. But it has nothing to do with you.'

'Then I won't ask any more,' she answered proudly, 'and I'll go out and find Gladys.' When she had gone, Tregaskiss took a fresh draught from his glass, and, drawing his blotting-pad to him, began to write in his big boyish hand:

'My own Darling,

'I longed so for the sight of your dear little bright face that I rode all the way over to the Surveyor's to-day, forty-five miles there and back, and I couldn't have done it if I hadn't changed nags at the Fencers'. You can just imagine my disappointment when I heard there that you

had gone away from the Ococks', and that it was no use my going on. And now I don't know how I can see you, for that old dragon, Mrs. Cusack, doesn't approve of my paying you too much attention. I'm feeling uncommonly bad about it all, Hetty. Somehow your caring for me, which I never guessed till just lately, seems to have altered everything, and to have turned me from a steady-going, contented chap into a reckless, miserable devil, not minding much what happens to him. It drives me mad to think of how jolly we might have been if everything was right; and then the thought of the pickaninny, and all the rest of the wretched business, sends me mad again the other way. Though I hate the idea of losing you, I believe the right unselfish course for me would be to go straight away to England or somewhere—only I am too hard up just now to think of that. And failing my clearing out, it would be best for you to leave the Cusacks, and find a home in another place; and if you forget me, so much the better for you. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, and I'll try and work a trip to Brinda

Downs if it's possible. Has Cusack got through his shearing, and when is he going to muster? You might suggest to the old lady to invite my wife's friend, a real——'

Tregaskiss had got so far, when Shand came in to report that part of the paddock fence was broken down, and that the mob of horses kept in readiness for the specials had taken to the Bush. With an oath Tregaskiss got up, putting the half-written letter between the leaves of the station ledger in the cupboard, which he always kept locked, the key of which he now turned and put in his pocket. Then he followed the new-chum out to see about sending black-boys after the missing animals.

Meanwhile Clare wandered forth past the garden-fence towards the lagoon. In the distance she could hear Ning's shrill prattle, and remembered that Gladys had taken the child when she and Geneste started to find Cyrus Chance's camp. When she had gone a little way in the same direction, Mrs. Tregaskiss turned, and made for the opposite end of the lagoon, where the gidia scrub

grew almost to the water, and where there were no fires nor any sign of habitation. To meet Geneste now in company of Mrs. Hilditch and of her child was more than she could bear. Then she heard her husband's 'Cooee' and shout for Tommy George and the black-boys to 'Murra, make haste and go after yarraman, that had bolted.' She knew that he would be at the camp presently, and would, no doubt, join the others. In the moonlight she could see Gladys' white dress and tall figure as she stood in front of one of the gunyas watching a group of blacks playing at cards on their blankets. To Gladys the blacks' camp had the charm of novelty, and Tregaskiss would be amused at her questions, and would make the boys 'show off,' and forget his worries, whatever they might be. Clare did not love her husband. At times—Heaven forgive her!—she almost hated him; but she had always derived a certain satisfaction from the knowledge that, whatever he might be to her, she at least was necessary to him. This assurance had comforted and sustained her in 'doing her duty,' as unfortunate wives are

apt to phrase to themselves the disagreeables of their lot. But since his return after her illness she had been strangely conscious of aloofness on his part, jealous irritability alternating with sullen avoidance of her society, and this had affected her in a way which once she could hardly have believed possible. She attributed it to the change in herself reacting upon him, sedulously as she strove to shut in the secret of her heart. To-night she had become aware, and with a sense of shock, that the change was essentially in himself, and that somehow there was a battle going on, in his undeveloped nature, of elementary instincts warring with each other—love for the pickaninny, a certain fealty to her, and a strong impulse in another direction. Was it that he was simply bored with the Leura life, longing to escape from his obligations, monetary, marital, and paternal—the latter holding him back ; or could it be he had conceived a sudden passion for another woman ? Miss Lawford was the only one who occurred to her mind. At the thought a spasm of disgust shook her—disgust not only at her husband and Miss

Lawford, but at herself. Gloss and glorify it as she would, the bald fact remained that her feeling for Geneste was as much outside the law as her husband's for Miss Lawford. They four were practically on the same level.

No, no; the finer part of her cried out in denial. Geneste was true and noble; and she—Heaven help her! she would still 'do her duty.'

She came to a lonely little spot at the very edge of the lagoon—a tiny inlet closed round with black gidia-trees, growing rather apart, and so showing their strange funereal boles and melancholy gray foliage, in contrast with the white, perfectly grassless ground beneath them. At the water's edge was a fringe of fast-withering rushes, and sometimes there would be a rustle in it—a sort of long 'tr—sse,' like that of a silk gown, and the dead dry reeds would bend and break as a startled water-fowl rose with a discordant cry of alarm. She could hear, too, the shrill chirrup of the small tree frog, and the fat 'poomp' of the bull frog as it flopped into the water. The place was creepy; one or two white-

barked saplings of the flooded gum looked like skeletons in the moonlight, and the water itself was black, with here and there a faint greenish brown scum, or a few scattered leaves of the water-lily on its surface.

Clare seated herself upon a twisted root of one of the gidia-trees protruding above the soil. Habit made her look first to see that there was no snake lurking near; then she bent forward, doubling herself, with her arms clasping her knees, and her head upon them, and her whole frame shaking with convulsive sobs.

She cried in sheer loneliness and desperation and longing—longing for the sweetness she might not taste, for the joy so near which she might not stretch out her hand to seize. The passion spent itself. Through her sobs she had been faintly conscious of low 'Coo-ees.' They might be calling for her. What did it matter? She knew that no one would come to seek her in this hiding-place, the security of which she had many times tested. She did not hear some footsteps which approached slowly, scarcely sounding in the devious course they pursued.

But presently a voice said very low, and with an immense sorrow and yearning :

'Clare—oh, my poor Clare !'

She raised her head and lifted her eyes, all wet and shining. Geneste was standing quite close to her, leaning against the trunk of a gidia-tree, and looking down on her, with eyes almost as bright as her own from kept-back tears.

'Oh, my poor Clare !' he repeated.

She tried to get up, but her limbs were stiff and cramped. He bent down and put his arms round her, and lifted her bodily. When she was beside him, he still held his arm lightly round her ; but he refrained from other caress, or further words of tenderness. She, woman-like, almost resented the restraint he put upon himself, which, had she known it, cost him a hard tussle. Why was he so cold ?

'Where are the others ?' she asked.

'They've gone back to the house. Tregaskiss came down, and Mrs. Hilditch was disappointed in her visit to Chance. She sent me on to announce her, but when I got to the tent, I could only see what looked like a bundle of dirty clothes, lying on a blanket

inside, and presently the old man grunted out, "Be off with you. If you want anything from me, you won't get it." So I departed. We stopped a bit talking to the blacks, and Ning did the interpreting, and Mrs. Hilditch has made herself pretty well acquainted with the family history of the tribe, and has arranged to photograph the lot of them to-morrow. Tregaskiss came down and joined us at the blacks' camp; then we coo-eed for you, and at last I said I would come and look for you.'

He talked on, giving her time to recover herself.

'How did you know where I should be? Nobody ever comes here.'

'Intuition told me. Spirit calling to spirit, perhaps. Do you remember once telling me that you came down sometimes in the evenings and sat by the lagoon among the gidia-trees? I knew you would choose the most lonely spot, and I walked round the bank till I found you. Clare, it cannot be I who have made you so unhappy?'

'No—yes; it all comes from the same thing.'

'If I make you unhappy,' he said, in a pained tone, 'I had better go away and leave you to yourself. I had better come here no more. But—I thought it might comfort you a little to know that there was a man near you upon whose devotion you might rely, and towards whom you would feel under no obligation—not even to return his feeling in the slightest degree.'

As he spoke he withdrew his arm in a slight movement of pique, which wounded her and made her desperate.

'You don't understand. I am tossed about in many ways. I don't know how I feel, except—except that I don't want you to go away from me.'

'I will never do that,' he answered fervently—'never till you yourself bid me go.'

'But,' she went on tremulously, 'it's all strange to me. I have never had the shadow of such a relation in my life. I never dreamed that it would be possible. I've always been a straight woman. Now I am acting falsehoods.'

'Oh, my dear, don't say that! It isn't true.'

'Yes, it is true. I felt it to-night. I couldn't look you in the face. I couldn't look at my husband, or my children—my poor little innocent children, whom I had no right to bring into the world. I had no right to marry Keith. I didn't care for him. I only wanted to escape from things. And I haven't loved the children as I ought, because—oh, Heaven forgive me!—because they were his.'

'Clare,' he protested, 'you do yourself a great injustice. There is no better mother in the world than you.'

'Can't you see? It's only because I'm afraid of my conscience. If I dared to be my true self—— No, no; I made up my mind at the beginning that I would do the best I could, and that there should never be any reproach against me—that I would keep myself apart from what was evil. And now,' she went on hurriedly, looking away from him—'now I am no better than anyone else. I have despised—others—and what am I? And perhaps it is this thing which has acted upon him—the falseness—my growing further away from him day by day, and getting to care

for you. One does not know how evil in one's self and in other people acts back again —it is in the air. He, too—I thought he was straight and simple—and that he was true to me, and that I could help him, and perhaps do him good. And now he, too——'

She paused, choked with a sob.

'You mean,' said Geneste, surprised at what he supposed the cause of her agitation, 'that your husband has been making a fool of himself about Miss Lawford, and that you think this is in some way attributable to the —the sympathy between you and me? But he isn't capable; you can't compare the two things. And why should it affect you so much? You must see that the sort of sentiment—if one can call it sentiment—which he has towards her is beneath your serious consideration, and not to be spoken in the same breath with my feeling for you.'

'Is that so? You make the distinction only because our natures are different from theirs. We think ourselves more refined —higher in the scale altogether. But are we? *Are* we? Mightn't we be nothing better than self-righteous hypocrites? That's how

I felt to-night, as we all sat there at dinner —and I was choked by the shame of it.'

'Clare, you truest and noblest of women! shame isn't a word for you to utter in remotest connection with yourself. To-morrow you will think differently.'

'To-morrow I shall think differently,' she repeated drearily. 'That's the worst of it. But to-night—— It's no use,' she went on; 'I can't help it. I *must* be just. If we *are* higher, then falseness in us must be worse. A thing must be either true or false; it must be either right or wrong.'

'Yes,' he admitted. 'But you forget this: You are appealing, not to the inherent truth of things which must always be in accord with the laws of Nature and with our own highest instincts, but to the truth as it has been falsely defined by unnatural social conventions.'

'Oh,' she exclaimed bewilderedly, 'I can't reason. I can only feel. It's all a miserable tangle. How is a wretched woman to find the clue? I'm lost and lonely. I'm frightened!'

The confession of weakness in her touched

him infinitely ; it put her on a new footing in regard to himself. It was as though she had appealed to him, with her armour doffed and her weapons thrown down, to maintain his chivalrous attitude towards her, to come no nearer, to respect her prohibition on words of love. He folded his arms stiffly, and drew back into his former position against the tree.

'My poor child,' he said, 'do not be frightened of me. Have I not shown that I can obey you ?'

'It—it is not that,' she answered very low. 'It is that I——' She paused. 'Can't you understand ? It is that I am frightened of myself.'

'Clare !' He had turned swiftly to her, his arms half unlocked. 'I have never asked you if you care for me,' he said. 'I will not ask you now. I will not say to you the words you bade me not speak.'

She kept her head away from him, though he could see that she was trembling, and though he knew by instinct that a struggle was going on within her. There was silence for a full minute, and the struggle ended—as

such struggles always do end. She made a little piteous movement towards him, and looked up into his face. And then he saw, what he had only before suspected, the height and depth of passion which this strange, self-contained, impassive creature was capable of reaching. Her whole face was changed ; the still lips were quivering, the eyes had an indescribable expression of tenderness ; her very form seemed pliable as a lily stem. She held out both hands, and he clasped them in his.

'Don't you see ?' she whispered. 'It is that I love you !'

He gathered her up against him.

'Clare, ask me to say it, darling—ask me yourself to tell you what you forbade me ever to say again.'

'Tell me——'

'I love you ! I love you ! Better than my life—better than anything the world holds or ever has held for me.'

'Better than—that other woman ?'

'Yes. That's past—gone—dead. This is a different thing altogether. That was a madness which nearly ruined my life—did

ruin it in one sense. That was my perdition. This will be my redemption.'

He kissed her.

'Are you lonely now, Clare?'

'No; I so wanted——'

'Are you frightened of me now?'

'I cannot tell. Dearest—it is only for this once—just so that we know and understand each other. It is not you that have failed; it is I, and I don't care. I *will* say it. I love you, my dearest. I'd like to stand out in face of all the world and acknowledge it. I'm not ashamed of loving you—*you—you!* But I *am* ashamed of being—what I am—to others. Oh, it can't go on! If we were to meet like this, and you kissed me—it was so sweet, so sweet!—I should long for you more and more; I should live only on the hope of seeing you. It's almost like that now—I should get to feel the life I must lead more and more impossible. No, no; you mustn't speak. I know what you are going to say. You must never say it. We mustn't let ourselves go on. The thought of the children—Keith's children—frightens me. I couldn't act falsehood before them. Once I lost self-

control, I shouldn't be able to bear it. I have always felt that. There comes a sort of control—an exaltation in the trying to hold one's self in. One can smile and smile, and all the time one's heart is breaking and no one knows. I could do that till you came. And then you forced me to be myself, and that was what first made me know.' Her words rushed out like a torrent escaping through loosened flood-gates. He obeyed her literally, speaking never a word. 'I couldn't go home and put the children to bed and hear Ning say her prayers—after this. No, I shan't think of it to-night. To-night it does not matter—nothing matters. But it's because I brought those little things into this dreadful world, and there's no one else they can depend upon, and I don't love them—not even as their father loves them—for that very reason I must keep good. I mustn't have—this in my life. Once dearest, dearest, once of my own very self — what for no man in the world I have ever done or ever shall do. I never kissed anyone like this—dearest, dearest of all, the only one ; it is for *you !*'

She clasped her hands behind his neck, drew his head down, and put her lips to his. Then she loosened her arms, and moved away from him back against the tree. There was an expression in her eyes, an intensity in her voice, a certain note of finality in the gesture with which she repelled an eager movement on his part towards her, which held him once more silent and self-restrained.

'Now it is all over,' she said quietly, though the emotion she tried hard to keep under struggled through in the agitated pauses she made here and there. 'This mustn't be ever again. . . . Never, never! There mustn't be any more words of love. It must be buried deep—deep in our hearts. But we shall always know that, though it is buried, its soul lives. . . . And we shall always believe in each other's love, and trust each other—utterly. It shall be like that with us . . . shall it not?' Her voice and her eyes were full of pleading. 'You will believe that I mean to keep myself true and good? You will believe when you hear me make a vow. . . . I'm going to make a vow —by most sacred duty. That's my duty

to my children. Oh, I mean it—I mean it! . . . I'm going to make my little Ning and my innocent baby my witnesses. I'm going to swear it on my own mother's cross. See!'

She drew from her dress the little old-fashioned cross she always wore, and kissed it solemnly.

Then silently she led the way back, and he followed her.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SPECIALS ON DUTY.

Gladys Hilditch fitted curiously into the life at Mount Wombo. She did not appear to feel the heat, which was now becoming intense, and she did not greatly mind the mosquitoes; at any rate, they did not seem to sting her, or, if they did, no marks were left on her velvety skin—that thick, smooth kind of skin which does not burn easily, and offers the least attraction to bloodthirsty insects. Snakes, scorpions, and centipedes she did, as she declared, draw the line at, but, happily, these were less common. Nor did she appear inconvenienced by the absence of those luxuries to which she had been accustomed. To be delivered from the whims and tyrannies of Parker, her maid,

was, she assured them, emancipation. Luxuriant wavy hair, which grows low on a Clytie-like forehead, and adorns a perfectly-shaped head, can be becomingly dressed in a Greek knot at small trouble to its owner. There did arise a difficulty as to the starching and ironing of Gladys' wonderful robes of muslin and lace, but this she solved by getting out some pieces of China silk, which she had bought in Singapore, and which she concocted into garments rather after the *chiton* model. These had, anyhow, the merit of not requiring frequent washing. There was something so complete about Gladys, that it was hard to fancy her subject to the little sordid woes of ordinary humanity. She was never ruffled, nor hot, nor tumbled-looking. She seemed, somehow, a creature out of a poetry-book, made to bask luxuriously in balmy air, to smile and chatter in her soft, languid voice, and to please and be pleased by everybody. Cyrus Chance's simile of 'Fair Ines' was not inappropriate.

They saw nothing of the old man for some little time. He took to going Port Victoria-

wards by another road, and when, upon one occasion, Clare met him riding on the other side of the Bore, and asked him why he did not proceed with his reformation of Mrs. Hilditch, he replied that he did not want to find her out a vain, wheedling woman, like all the rest, which he might do if there were other men in the way, and that, moreover, he didn't intend to give Tregaskiss another opportunity of making him eat dirt.

'But tell her she has done the old miser good,' he added to Clare, 'and that maybe she'll find some time the only three days old Cyrus ever spent in a woman's company, since he grew to manhood, will be written down in his log. She and you, Mistress Tregaskiss, have given me a revelation of what the poetry-women might be like.'

Gladys laughed when Clare told her that she was the embodiment of old Cyrus Chance's dreams of 'poetry-women,' and then she became grave.

'What's the use of being an ideal to ninety-nine men,' she asked bitterly, 'if the hundredth man looks upon you as an incarnate fiend?'

'Who is the hundredth man, Gladys?' asked her friend.

'Never mind,' Gladys answered. 'Perhaps I shall tell you some day. You don't doubt, I suppose, that there have been ninety-and-nine?'

'No; of that there could certainly be no doubt.'

Gladys had a good many amusing stories of the suitors of various nationalities who, since her widowhood, had sighed at her feet, and of the struggle between love and lucre in the minds of some of them when they had discovered that upon her remarriage the five thousand a year would melt into nothingness. She had her cynical, sophisticated way, also, of touching upon the modern social code as applied to the flirtations of married women.

'It's a disappointment, dear. The heroics and the platonics are so magnificent at the beginning, but they never last. The day always comes when it's a question with the man of all or nothing, and then, worse luck for the poor woman if it's all, and worse luck still if she has the strength to make it nothing.

Clare,' and Gladys became suddenly earnest, 'don't believe in heroics.'

'You used to preach them once, Gladys.'

'Once! Ah, that was before I married Mr. Hilditch.'

'Gladys—was he so very bad to you?'

'Bad! he was goodness itself—as far as loading me with diamonds, giving me everything I could want, and glorying in me as the most satisfying investment he had ever made, counts as goodness. He wasn't a bad sort.' Clare remembered that Blanchard had used the words. Gladys walked slowly up and down the room as she talked, stopping every now and then and making soft gestures which seemed to give an unexpected tragic point to her words. 'He was good-natured till his illness increased and made him gradually more and more irritable and unreasonable. But he was low, low, mean, and vulgar. He didn't know what an ideal meant; everything he touched seemed to wither into something contemptible, something sordid as he was himself. To live with him was like being shut up without a single breath of pure, fresh air, in a stove-heated atmosphere. The

American railway carriages, with their closed ventilators and horrible money-making crowd of passengers, used to remind me of him. That was his view of life, and to share it was like being slowly poisoned. Do you know, I used sometimes to look back upon the dirty old studio days, and mamma, and her cheap art and Cassandra's "occult" nonsense, and the dreadful second-rate actors and authors, talking shop at our At-homes, which we always thought, in their way, just as bad as anything could be. Well, I used to look back upon all that with a perfect longing! Oh, it was salvation to come across something disinterested, something noble, someone who did not live only for self, for making and spending money, for eating and drinking, and racing, and flirting—and worse; someone who did not always impute mean motives, who could sacrifice worldly advantages for the sake of an idea—for the sake of honesty and self-respect.' Gladys stopped; her voice had deepened with gathering emotion. 'Clare,' she went on—almost in a whisper now, coming closer and kneeling down by the chair on which Mrs. Tregaskiss sat, with her sewing

in her lap—'if you had been living my life, and felt yourself getting worse and worse, more vain and insincere, and dependent upon excitement, no matter of what kind, to distract from the inward gnawing, and if you had met such a one—a man, unlike all other men you had ever known, wouldn't you have stretched out your hands to him as if he had been your saviour, and implored him to take pity upon you, and teach you what good meant?'

'Yes—tell me, Gladys.'

'Tell you!' Gladys suddenly rose, and her emotion ended in a bitter little laugh. 'Clare, you know—you know. Don't be deluded by it; don't stretch out your hand; don't think any good will come of it. It will be the old, old story. If he's human, he'll fall in love with you and hate himself and despise you; and if he is superhumanly good and strong, he'll despise you just the same—and desert you; and all your life afterwards will be just one long ache to win his good opinion again, so that you will go to the other end of the world for the chance of seeing him once more, and feeling yourself—forgiven.'

Gladys walked to the open French window, and stood there, looking out, saying nothing. Clare followed. Then, as if to prevent her from making any comment on the outburst, Gladys cried:

'I'm going down to bathe in the Creek. Ning, put away your dolls and debil-debils, and come along, and we'll take the camera and afterwards photograph the pickaninnies in a group. Clare, there's a black-boy riding up through the clearing, and he doesn't look like one of our lot.'

'My word!' cried Ning, in mongrel English, 'Yarraman belonging to that fellow plenty knocked up.'

'He's got rather the look of Gordon's last messenger,' observed Gladys—'a sort of "beleaguered city" air.'

Gladys was not altogether wrong in her conjecture. Tregaskiss, who had been mending saddles in the workshop, came in presently with a letter in his hand. The boy had ridden over in hot haste from Brinda Plains, bearer of an urgent request from Mr. Cusack, that Tregaskiss would bring over such armed men as he could muster for the protection of

the Brinda Plains head-station and wool-shed, upon which a large force of Unionists were reported to be marching. He was also begged to send the news to Geneste. Mr. Cusack stated that he had already invoked the aid of the specials from Ilganda, but that, as they might be engaged on the same duty elsewhere, he considered it wise to appeal also to his neighbours. The letter concluded with an invitation to Mrs. Tregaskiss and her friend, if they should be nervous about remaining without sufficient guard at home, to accompany Tregaskiss and his men, so that all the ladies might be safely under one roof and duly protected. There was no danger of their encountering the marauders on the road, nor the slightest risk of violence to them, as the strikers were moving from an opposite direction; but it was as well to be prepared against all possible emergencies, and if the alarm came to nothing, they could, no doubt, find amusement at Brinda Plains to repay them for the long ride. Clearly, in Mr. Cusack's estimation a stay at Brinda Plains, under any conditions, was preferable to residence at Mount Wombo.

There was a lofty patronage in the tone of Mr. Cusack's invitation, blending amusingly with his evident alarm and anxiety to swell the force at Brinda Plains as much as possible, which Gladys scented and which provoked Mrs. Tregaskiss' scorn. Tregaskiss was elated as a schoolboy; he wanted to set off at once. Clare demurred, and it was finally settled that he should start over by himself that evening, leaving the ladies to follow under Mr. Shand's escort on the following morning. Mr. Hansen was to be recalled from the out-station to keep watch at Mount Wombo and to send the alarm in case of any attack; but this was considered very improbable. Tregaskiss excused his haste to obey the summons on the plea that he might be able to pounce more easily on the men who had killed his horses. He was also going to take some spare horses, which would be left half-way in readiness for the buggy to-morrow.

A long cavalcade started early next morning. Mr. Shand drove the buggy, with Mrs. Tregaskiss, the children, and Claribel. The baggage was partly strapped on behind,

but Mrs. Hilditch's gowns necessitated a pack-horse as well, and Gladys rode beside the black-boy who drove it. Gladys' manner showed tension, and Clare divined something of her state of repressed excitement. She, too, was inwardly perturbed, for was not she going to meet Geneste? It was more than to be expected that he would obey the call, for he would know that she had left Mount Wombo; she had taken the precaution of giving him this information so that he might not be anxious, and perhaps have a useless ride to assure himself that all was well. So Clare excused her letter to him, but she knew only too well that the craving to be with him was increasing day by day, and the repressive system which both had so far conscientiously pursued, seemed in both but to sharpen the edge of longing. Sometimes Clare wondered whether, in spite of her vow, barriers would not one day be thrown down, and the touch of his lips, the pressure of his arms, be again courted in desperate heart-hunger which would endure no denial. Then she would fall on her knees and pray; and she would look at the little cross, which was

the symbol of all she held most holy, and recall the vow she had made; she had a superstitious dread lest, if she allowed herself to drift into more lover-like relations with Geneste, the expiatory penalty she had after a fashion invoked upon her children would be duly dealt forth.

So these two women had each her secret anxieties and passionate musings as they went on their journey through the length of that tropical day. The heat was intense, and seemed reflected upon the parched plain; the cattle, lean and thirsty, looked up pathetically from their scanty pasturage; the flies swarmed round the buggy, the water-holes were dried up and putrid; desolation and drought reigned on the face of the land. Then, where the plains ended, came more melancholy stretches of gidia shrub —the sandy flat, with nothing but salt-bush growing beneath the stunted, dried-up trees; and as afternoon crept on the stillness of noonday gave place to strange insect noises, whirring of locusts, and scuttering of iguanas.

When they halted for the change of horses

Gladys gave a little shudder, and for the first time confessed herself disenchanted with Bush life.

'How have you lived all these years, with every faculty in you starved, and no hope of escape from these dreary desert plains?' she cried.

'Ah! you haven't seen the plains after rain and in the early spring,' answered Clare. 'They are beautiful then, with the sandal-wood in blossom and the horrible lignum vitæ covered with the most lovely white flowers. And here is someone worse off than I am.'

They had stopped at a fencer's encampment, and a handsome, discontented young woman appeared at the opening of a tent, which had a bough-shade in front of it, and invited them in. She took a baby out of a tub, which she turned upside down for Gladys to sit upon.

'It's an outlandish place to see a lady,' she said, 'and you don't look like the Bush, somehow.'

She made them some quart-pot tea, and Clare, with her patient kindliness, took the

dirty, crying baby on her knee, and nursed it into quietude, while Claribel walked about with her own. Gladys helped to prepare the tea, and Ning prattled in her queer way. It was not an unpleasant interlude, and roused both the women—perhaps the fencer's wife, too — from morbid dreams, bringing Mrs. Tregaskiss once more into the demesne of practical life. She talked to the fencer's wife about her baby, about the hardships of her lot, and bade her try and get over for a short holiday to Mount Wombo. They might manage to give her and the baby a lift on their return journey, she said; and then she had the pack unstrapped, and searched till she found a tin of groats and some pre served milk for the fencer's child.

It was nearly dark when they reached Brinda Plains, and the many-verandaed house, standing in its green garden, was, Gladys said, like an oasis in a march through Sahara. It did not seem as though the place were in particular need of an armed force to protect it, though there was a look of expectancy upon the faces of the men drawn up in an irregular line close to the

wool-shed, in the veranda of which a number of bales, ready sewn up, were waiting for cartage, and a row of carbines near them suggested preparations for siege. A party of ladies, among whom was Tregaskiss, were standing near the Workings as the buggy drove up, and Helen, followed by Tregaskiss and Miss Lawford, came forward.

'Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss, how nice of you to come, and to bring Mrs. Hilditch! We did so want to see Mrs. Hilditch. Mother says that father's concern about the Strikers was all a "plant" to get Mrs. Hilditch over.' Helen did not disdain occasional Australianisms. 'We have heard nothing more; and now we have got the Specials, and we dance every evening, and it is really great fun. Miss Lawford and I are wishing that there might be an alarm every week.'

Helen's greetings to Mrs. Hilditch were tempered with awe. What a wonderful place must England be if it produced such beings as these two women! and was it any marvel that Englishmen did not readily take Australian girls to wife when they had the chance of marrying a Clare Tregaskiss or a

Gladys Hilditch? Such were her reflections, and she did not know that both Gladys and Clare were studying her with a wistful interest, and wondering, in their turn, that Australian men should ever want to go elsewhere for their mates.

Miss Lawford was hysterically effusive, especially to the children. She insisted on carrying the baby, and held Ning's hand as she walked beside the child's father. She had a fretted, anxious appearance, and her nervousness took the form of forced gaiety. Poor little mortal! she, too, meant no harm. She was only a loosely-tied bundle of nerves and sensations, craving for excitement, full of unhealthy impulses, tossed about at the caprice of fate, and rebounding with more or less force against the circumstances that environed her. Moreover, strange as it may appear, she was the victim of a genuine infatuation for Tregaskiss, one of those attractions of physique and temperament as compelling, after their fashion, as others of the more spiritual kind. His strong animal vitality dominated her nervous, morbid disposition, and gave her the stimulant her

nature needed. The fact that he was married, and that she hated Mrs. Tregaskiss and wished to make her uncomfortable, had at first given zest to the flirtation, now long past that stage, and which, to do Tregaskiss credit, would never have gone the length it had done but for her encouragement, and her sudden avowal that she was in love with him. 'In love' expresses the feverish sentiment which consumed both; it is very doubtful whether either of the two was capable of real love as a permanent condition.

Mr. Cusack was a little ashamed of his hasty summons.

'Told Tregaskiss that I knew it was the only way to bring you over,' he said blusteringly. 'It would never have done for Mrs. Hilditch to leave the district without seeing Brinda Plains. Not that I am one to "blow," as we Australians put it, but things are as they are, Mrs. Hilditch; and if this is considered the show-place on the Leura, that's not my fault, is it?'

He was very attentive to Gladys. A beautiful widow, with five thousand a year,

was a personage to command consideration. Mrs. Cusack, too, was anxious to show that they were thoroughly English, and that if the gentlemen did not don the regulation dress suit for dinner, it was only because the heat compelled them to adopt a cooler costume.

She insisted in summer upon immaculate garments of white duck, so she informed Gladys, and woe betide the unhappy traveller unsuitably equipped.

'Of course you know, my dear,' explained the lady of Brinda Plains, 'if a person sends in his name, it is understood in the Bush that he is received into the parlour; but unless we see that he is a gentleman, and accustomed to the ways of society, we do not quite treat him as one of ourselves.'

Geneste was in the veranda when the Mount Wombo party arrived. He had come an hour or two earlier. At dinner, Mrs. Hilditch having been given the place of honour, he found himself beside Clare.

'Where is Mr. Blanchard?' she asked.

'Poor Blanchard! I don't think he was prepared for the surprise in store for him.

He has been at Ilganda after the Specials, and only came back just before dinner. The new-chums are having their meal at Bachelors' Quarters—like the grown-up children who are sent to the schoolroom when there's a dinner-party—to make room for our brave defenders.'

The Specials mustered about a dozen, and their gray uniforms, turned back with scarlet, made an agreeable variety among the white duck garments at the table. They were mostly young men, 'the gilded youth of Leichardt's Land,' as the *Leura Chronicle* called them, who had volunteered for the occasion, and were having rather a good time among the Leura young ladies. Helen Cusack had one of them on her right, and young Gillespie, on the other side of the table, looked cross, and would hardly speak to another Special who was his next neighbour. Clare noticed that he had lost his consumptive appearance, and Mrs. Cusack drew attention to his increase of flesh and colour, which she attributed to the excellent care she had given him.

'I wish I could have poor Mrs. Carmody

over here for six months,' said that good lady. 'I'd make a cure with my egg-flip and port wine jelly sooner than you will do, Dr. Geneste, with your drugs.'

'I wish my drugs had a chance,' said Geneste; 'not that I believe in drugs anyhow, but Carmody won't have it that there is anything the matter, and will not let me even suggest remedies.'

'Oh, well,' said Mrs. Cusack comfortably, 'she is much better again now, poor thing! Such a colour, and in capital spirits; she needs to have a spirit with all those children depending upon her.'

'I wish you would go over and see Mrs. Carmody,' Geneste said to Mrs. Tregaskiss. 'She and her husband both dislike the Cusacks, except Miss Cusack, of course, and it is difficult for her to see much of them. She told me that she had taken a great fancy to you.'

'I will go, certainly. But how? We are a long way off.'

'Not when you are here. If you stay long enough, we might ride over one day; it is not more than fifteen miles. I can't

help thinking you would be a comfort to her.'

They fell into silence. To talk commonplace was difficult now, and nothing else was possible. Sometimes it seemed to Clare that words between them were not needed; the joy of being near each other, with that bond of perfect sympathy uniting their souls, was sufficient to make all conditions Paradisaic; and then at other times she had a desperate sense of revolt against limitations, and told herself that it would be almost better never to see him at all than under such restraint. To-night once or twice she became conscious that Helen Cusack was watching them, and there was something in the girl's wistful gaze which went to her heart. What right had she to come and take away Helen's lover? for she had an intuition that but for her Geneste would now be Helen's declared suitor. Geneste himself to a certain extent shared this feeling, and could never rid himself altogether of a sense of disloyalty. Helen was, in truth, very unhappy, but she had a brave heart, and was determined that Geneste should not suspect her secret.

Least of all would she have had it suspected by Mrs. Tregaskiss, though as yet her vague fancy that Geneste entertained any deeper regard for Clare than that of a friend had not definitely shaped itself in her mind. But the mind of a pure girl is unconsciously to itself a touchstone. Helen was wretched because her instinct told her that there were complications in the lives of those around her, not all for good. She wished that her mother would send away Miss Lawford ; she wished that Mr. Tregaskiss could be induced to take less whisky, and in their preparations for this evening she had begged Mrs. Cusack to be less liberal with the rum in her concoction of the Leura Mixture. It was, however, hardly necessary to give Mrs. Cusack the warning, for, as a matter of fact, the neighbourhood was pretty well aware of Tregaskiss' weakness. 'What a pity,' people said—those, at any rate, who felt themselves unassailable in the matter of too free indulgence in 'nips.' 'Such a good-looking fellow, and sociable and open-handed, too, when the humour took him, though he could be stingy enough in some ways, and, unlike old Cyrus Chance,

whose bark was always worse than his bite, free in promises though not so ready in fulfilment.'

Tregaskiss was morosely silent, and his eyes had a wild look. Clare watched him with dread. She was always nervous when with him in company, and she, too, was silent and preoccupied. The dinner went, however, in other respects merrily enough. The Specials had a great deal to say for themselves, Mrs. Cusack talked loudly, and Gladys was feverishly animated in her quiet, well-bred way. She responded readily to Mr. Cusack's sallies, but her eyes wandered searchingly round, and she paled at the sound of any stir outside. After dinner, when they were all sitting in the veranda, a little troop of tall men in white clothes filed out through the drawing-room. Mrs. Cusack called out:

'Come, Mr. Shand; I hope you got properly looked after at the quarters. You see, we are rather crowded out. Mr. Blanchard, I trust you have brought down some songs. I am sure Mrs. Hilditch would like to hear you. Come and be introduced to Mrs. Hilditch.

This is Mr. Blanchard,' she added to Gladys; 'he has not been so very long out from England, and so you should have plenty to talk about. We all chaff Mr. Blanchard about being so very English.'

CHAPTER XX.

GLADYS PLEADS.

Ambrose Blanchard bowed profoundly. Gladys half rose and held out her hand.

'Mr. Blanchard and I have met in England,' she said.

Mrs. Cusack was all amazement.

'And you never told us!' she exclaimed reproachfully to the young man. 'And when we were all so excited at hearing of Mrs. Tregaskiss' English friend! We don't often have such visitors on the Leura,' she added, turning to Gladys. 'I think it is very strange of Mr. Blanchard to have kept so close about you.'

'Not at all strange,' replied Gladys, with self-possession. 'There are other Mrs. Hilditches in the world; it is a very common

name, and I have several sisters-in-law. Come,' she said, making a dexterous movement, which swept her squatter's chair well back into the shadow of a vine, and motioning with a little imperious air to Blanchard to obey her signal, 'do sit down and tell me everything that has happened to you since we met.'

He drew another chair beside her. Far less composed than she, it was a minute or two before he answered. That moment of silence was big with memories. To Ambrose Blanchard, Gladys Hilditch had represented the supreme temptation of his life; he had fled from her, in distrust of himself, and as she believed in scorn of her.

'There is not much to tell,' he said. 'I've knocked about and roughed it a good deal, and made a little money at the gold fields, and then lost it. Now I am here, learning something about the management of sheep, with an idea of going into partnership with some likely person later on.' He paused, and she said nothing. Now that they were out of the range of Mrs. Cusack's eyes, she made no attempt to keep up the farce and

play her part of tourist amused at and inquisitive about everything around her. 'It is very good of you,' he added, 'to be interested in my doings.' Still she made no reply. 'Have you—have you,' he asked nervously, 'seen anything of my people?'

'You know we gave up Felmarshes,' Gladys returned, without directly answering his question.

'I had not heard. But of course there must have been a difference,' he said vaguely. 'I know nothing; nobody has written.'

'I heard from Gertrude not long ago; she said they had had a letter from you.'

'Poor Gertrude! I conclude that my father has forbidden her to hold communication with his renegade son.'

'She says that she is bound by her promise to him. I think she interprets it rather too literally.'

'Well, I suppose that a wife is bound to obey her husband,' he returned. 'I confess that I had little hope of any good coming from her intercession. However, her boy will be the gainer—though that was not the

point. But I have nothing to say against Gertrude,' he added. 'She was a very good stepmother.'

'Oh yes, Mrs. Blanchard would perform always what was in her bond,' said Gladys; 'but she would not do anything more, especially if it were against her own interests.'

'And perhaps you don't know anything about my father—poor old chap?'

Blanchard spoke with feeling.

'I know that he is looking dreadfully aged; and though he is as hard as a rock, and will never go back from his word, I am sure he frets a good deal about you.'

'Then you have seen him?' cried Blanchard eagerly.

'I went down to see him; and it was he who told me where you were. I wanted to be able to give you the last news of him—if we should meet.'

'That was good of you. But—so it was of no use?'

'No; it was of no use. If you want to do any good, you must go home.'

'I can't do that,' Blanchard answered. 'I

am like my father; and I cannot go back from my word. He was looking ill, you say?'

'Yes; infirm and broken. Mr. Blanchard, do not be stubborn; go home and be reconciled to your father.'

'I am afraid that is impossible,' he answered. There was a pause, and then he said: 'I am very glad, since you decided to visit Australia, that you should have come where we were certain to meet.'

'I—of course I should naturally want to be with Clare Tregaskiss. We were girls together.'

'I remember your telling me you had a friend in Australia, but I only learned the other day that it was Mrs. Tregaskiss.'

Again there was a pause. He went on in a conventional tone.

'You must have been sorry to give up Felmarshes.'

'No, I was not sorry.' Then she added: 'It was while we were in Egypt — that winter after you left—that Mr. Hilditch got so much worse. We never went back to Felmarshes again.'

'I was very sorry to hear of your loss,' he said, still conventionally.

'Oh, don't let us talk as if we stood quite outside the truth of everything,' Gladys exclaimed, her whole manner changing as she turned her eyes on him for an instant in piercing reproach. 'You must know how I feel about it, and how I have hated myself. But I——' She faltered, and then there came into her voice the break as of tears. 'I tried to do what I could for him.'

'Indeed, I am sure of that.'

'I don't know why you should be so sure of it,' she answered, with a sad little laugh. 'Your opinion can't have altered much, and you never thought well of me in the old days, not even as well, perhaps, as I deserved. You never gave me credit for being sincere about anything. You looked upon me as a mere vain, heartless creature of moods, living for the distraction of the hour, and taking my moral haschish in whatever form it happened to offer itself—society, gambling, amateur philanthropy, religion, preaching woman's wrongs——'

'Or breaking men's hearts,' he put in bitterly.

'Yes, I know what you are thinking of. Well, I'll admit it—breaking men's hearts, if you choose.' Her voice had become hard, and she spoke with a defiant accent. 'It was a bad business, that of your friend, the Socialist. It cured me of my East End mania and of my democratic tendencies. It cured me of other things besides.'

'Don't!' he exclaimed, half stretching out his hand, as though her words and manner hurt him.

'Yes, I know. You are thinking that I am as heartless as ever; that I am glorying, perhaps, at this moment in the thought that a man killed himself because of me. You meant me to know that; you did not spare me. I got his letter—and the rest. The outside envelope told me that you had sent it—that you had guessed I was the woman who had treated him so cruelly. I knew, too, that he was the reason you never came to see me any more.'

'Ironside was my friend—and I saw him lying dead.'

'Do you think,' she cried, 'that I haven't seen him lying dead, too—night after night in my dreams—and when I have wakened up in the darkness, cold and trembling with terror? Do you know that I nearly died of the horror of it? But do you think, too, *that* would have happened if I had met you before I met him?'

'I don't know. How can I tell? I suppose a bird of prey must obey its instincts.'

'A bird of prey? Oh, you *are* cruel!'

She leaned back in her chair, drawing her body together with a slight shudder. For several minutes neither spoke. A lamp was moved within, and the light of it streamed through the French window on to Gladys' face.

It gave him a shock to see how her face had changed, and how that sudden look of age beyond her years and of bitter experience had come upon it.

Just then there was a noise and stir, as Mr. Cusack, followed by two or three of the gentlemen who had remained in the dining-room, came out and spoke to a trooper

waiting outside. He had to report news, communicated by a traveller at the huts, to the effect that the Unionists, hearing that the station was so well guarded, had abandoned their warlike purpose, and were quietly dispersing. The incident occasioned some flutter in the veranda, and under cover of it Gladys rose, withdrawing from the light. Blanchard got up too, and was making a formal excuse for leaving her, but she stopped him.

'No, no. What does it matter about the Unionists? I felt that the prospect of an attack was too good to come true. It would have been exciting; but I am doomed to disappointment. Aren't you saying to yourself, "That is just how she used to be. The bird of prey instincts are strong in her still"?'

'No,' he replied. 'I am sorry I said that. I see that it wounded you.'

'Come out into the garden,' she said abruptly. 'I see there are people walking about. I can make out Dr. Geneste, and is it Clare or pretty Miss Cusack? Oh, it's Clare. I wonder you did not fall in love with

Miss Cusack—but perhaps you *have* fallen in love with her.'

He made an impatient gesture of denial.

They were in the garden now, walking between the little avenue of orange-trees. Gladys stopped to comment upon the stars—to ask questions about the Southern constellations. She thought the Southern Cross overrated, and she had seen nothing on the Leura yet, in the matter of atmospheric effect, comparable to the Egyptian afterglow. She had observed also that the fashion of sleeves in the Bush was in the same stage of evolution as in the remoter districts of London.

'That means survival of monstrosity. Please observe the cut of mine. The sleeves in the streets of London got on my nerves; they were making me seriously ill—they—and other things. It's always the last straw, you know. When I told my doctor, he suggested a trip into the wilds of Africa or Australia. But you see that there is no escape for me. That little dark, prettyish, fifth-rate-looking governess, whom Mr. Tregaskiss seems to admire, would do

credit to Westbourne Grove. There's one atrocity of civilization, however, that I don't find here—Cook hasn't yet vulgarized the blacks.'

'No doubt they are being demoralized by more pernicious influences of civilization.'

He spoke awkwardly. Her inconsequent chatter, veiling, as he felt, an agitation she was afraid might master her, afflicted him terribly, and when she answered him with her soft, falsely-strung laugh, 'Oh, of course, human nature is the same all the world over, and the vices of barbarism are pretty much what one finds them in London drawing-rooms; I am beginning to discover that here already,' he exclaimed in impetuous answer:

'It is my turn now to beseech you that we may not talk banalities. At least, let us be true to ourselves.'

'Even to our vices?' she asked, laughing again; and then went on in a totally different tone, 'Yes, that's what I came to Australia for. I wanted to tell you the truth about something.'

'To tell me!' he repeated.

'You can't accuse me this time of not being candid. It is not often a woman has the honesty to own to a man that she has travelled twelve thousand miles—more or less—on the chance of seeing him. Let us sit here.' She had halted at the seat under the passion vine, to which he had almost unconsciously led her as the most retired which the garden offered. He did not obey her invitation to place himself by her side, but stood leaning against the trellis, and there was something aloof and judicial in his aspect—the result, indeed, of nervous tension, and not of disapprobation—which goaded her to desperate frankness. 'I wanted to tell you the whole truth about my relations with Mr. Ironside. I never talked to you about him. I did not know you were such great friends till—after everything was over. I never saw you together.'

'We were not much together—at that time,' he answered stiffly, 'and "great friends" in the ordinary sense we were not. We had different grooves of action. I did not sympathize entirely with poor Ironside's methods, which latterly got too Anarchic

for my taste. As the demagogue, I confess that he jarred upon me; but as the man——'

'Ah, the man! He was one by himself.'

'As the man, he influenced my life more than any other human being has done. It was he who first inoculated me with Socialistic theories—notions that I feel now to have been mistaken. He first brought home to me the virtue of intellectual honesty, and made me feel the absolute necessity of giving up the Church. He was like the spark to the tow, and his enthusiasm carried me along with the force of a high wind to a flame. Then I admired his immense resources, his power of organization; his very fanaticism was inspiring.'

'He was a fanatic in everything,' assented Gladys.

'He was bound to die for something before reaching his prime; a Cause perhaps as little worthy—as a woman.'

His voice dropped.

'It is not heartlessness which makes me speak of him in that impersonal way,' she said gently. 'Please believe that. I have thought and felt so much about him that I

have got to look upon him more as an instrument of fate than an ordinary human being. For me, too, in a very different way, he has been a determining influence.'

She stopped; Blanchard seemed to be waiting for her to explain herself further. She began again, the words rushing forth impulsively, with scarcely any break :

'Mr. Blanchard, I want to say to you, in my own extenuation, what you never gave me a chance of saying before, and at any rate you shall know now the exact truth about it, and you shall think me as bad as you please. I don't suppose my conduct deserves to be extenuated, but I must say this—it was not vanity and greed of conquest which in the beginning made me see all I could of John Ironside. It—it was something of the same kind of feeling which later' —she hesitated—'later drew me to you. It was a coarse, crude attempt at realizing that feeling — in him — which was afterwards realized in you. Oh, people make such a mistake in supposing that women's instinct always guides them straight in matters of that kind! One's nature has a need, and the first

attempt to satisfy it is as elementary often as the savage's fetish belief. I don't know how to make you understand——'

'I think I understand,' he said. 'You thought Ironside might help you, as you afterwards fancied—mistakenly, too—that I might be able to help you. Perhaps we might have helped you, one or the other of us, if we had been less human and you—a different sort of woman.'

'Ah!' A gleam of joy came into Gladys' face. 'Yes, *you* might have helped me,' she said slowly. 'You might have done a great deal for me. But you would not; you deserted me. John Ironside could not have helped me in any real way. There was no true affinity; the elements of combination weren't there. It was an accidental attraction—one that had nothing to do with spirit—though the attraction was genuine enough at first. He happened to come into my life at a critical moment, when I was in a mood of intense revulsion, and when I was utterly rudderless. For the moment he dominated my nature, and his charm for me was that, for the first time, I encountered what seemed

a granite man. We acted and reacted upon each other. I think the influence must have had something electric in it.'

'Yours upon him was certainly of that nature.'

'In the beginning, it was the fascination of repulsion—for him, anyhow, I fancy. And then the poles changed. For me he was something positive—compelling. He forced life upon me in its hideousness, its reality, its magnificent power—life in the big thrilling sense, not in that of my drawing-room drama. He made me long to experience the grip of strong feeling—of an intoxication which freed one from one's self. You know—no, you can't know or guess what my marriage was to me—the awful deadness of it. Sometimes I feel that Clare Tregaskiss knows and understands; but she is strong, she can hide what she suffers under that strange quiet smile; and I long to tell her, to talk to her of it, and I dare not. Oh, how one agonized for a breath of something pungent! I tried to get it in—well, you know the sort of flirtations a London woman falls into, and the kind of men one has to do with. Then I went on a

pilgrimage to Lourdes for my soul's healing. John Ironside was the person to appeal to me in that mood. There wasn't the least thought, at first, of making him love me. The East End mania was genuine. Then there came a dreadful moment when that excitement palled and I saw another excitement—straight in front of me—one I'd never had before. I saw that the granite was softening—that he was beginning to care for me. I thought I should like to know what it felt like to be loved by such a man. I wanted—this is all I have got to put forward in extenuation here—I wanted to be made to care for him—to be strung up to some heroic endeavour—even to renunciation—I knew that was what love must mean—for me. I was never a wicked woman—in that sense.'

'You need not tell me that,' he interrupted hoarsely.

'Well, I told myself that a real affection—a real interest—would be my salvation. I wanted to believe in his aims and to help him to realize them—to do some work in the world—anyhow to devote some of my super-

fluous cash to the relief of those wretched starving creatures—you remember that strike winter? But when I saw he was fighting against my influence, steeling himself and keeping away from me, the devil took me in possession and I wanted to win the battle. I determined that I would conquer, and that he should own himself beaten. That was just before we took Felmarshes.' Blanchard bowed his head. 'Well—you know—I heard you preach. I saw your face so worn and so "lifted"—I don't know how to express it. You've lost that look a good deal. It moved me—it was a Savonarola look—I got that sort of feeling about you—that you would be the person to go to in trouble. And then you came and dined with us—we had a lot of people, do you remember?—the racing set. I was so ashamed of them. And we went to the Manor, and then there was the fever in the village, and you seemed to want to fling away your life in looking after the poor people. Do you remember that autumn?'

'Don't let us speak of it,' he replied with emotion. 'I remember it all too well. I

remember your wonderful courage during that fever time—your generosity and devotion; and how you seemed to be trying to show me that, under the frivolous mask, and amidst all the luxury and thoughtless selfishness of life in that palace on the hill, there was the stuff of which ideals are made. I was wrong in saying that it was entirely Ironside who influenced me at that crisis in my life. You influenced me greatly, too. Your words and ways and the trust you placed in me, undeserved as it was, forced me to be true to the highest standard I knew, that of sincerity.'

'And you preached that sermon—that wonderful sermon which was like a bomb in the peaceful household. And you gave up everything and were banished from your inheritance and went to work among the dockers in London. I have kept all the letters you wrote me then—all that I ever had from you.' He was visibly moved. 'I used to think,' she went on, in a childlike way, 'that you were to me something of what Daniel Deronda was to Gwendolen.'

'Oh, do not say that!' he cried.

'It is true. I leaned on you in the same way.'

'I was not like Daniel Deronda in the very least.'

'No'—she laughed—'you always said the conventional thing about him—that he was a woman's hero, and not flesh and blood. Perhaps that is true, but it did not alter Gwendolen's feeling. If Daniel had had reason to believe Gwendolen insincere in her professions towards him, and utterly unworthy in every way, no doubt he would have acted like a man's man, and he would have run away in anger and disgust and left her to her fate, even if there had been no Myra in the case.'

'There was no Myra in the case,' said the young man in a stifled voice.

'No; there was only John Ironside. And when you found out that your Gwendolen had said the same things to John Ironside—almost—as to you; had appealed to him to teach her—quite differently, but then you would not have known that! Well, you would have thought it all just the same kind of woman's fooling—all part of the play!

Then, when you found that she had worked for him among the London poor, as I did for you among the poor at Felmarshes—and all the time only as a reason for getting into touch with you, only as the lure of a coquette, only to lead up to the thrill of a dramatic situation—"Frightfully thrilling!" you know, as Hilda Wangel would say. But I forgot—you left England before Ibsen became the fashion. Oh, well, it would have been no wonder if you thought——'

'That you were preparing the same fate for me.'

'With all the same art and the same guile. Oh yes! you might have said to yourself, "One fine day, when the play begins to get wearisome, this double-faced wretch will throw off the mask, and I shall see her as she is, in her abominable selfishness and callous greed of power—just as *he* saw her at the last." You might very well have expected to find that she had only been amusing herself, playing a sort of game of chess with your sanctities which she had talked so finely about, just to make you believe her a simple, innocent creature; and then, when she had

checkmated you, and the battle held no more interest, sweeping them off the board, and bidding you go about your business and leave her to find a new amusement. Oh, how you would despise her! How you would hate her!'

'No; never that!' he interrupted.

'And you would glory in hurting her—as it was in your power alone to hurt her—with silent contempt. When she had humiliated herself—thrown herself at your feet——'

Gladys' voice was choked. She flung her arms over the back of the seat and buried her face in them. He could see that she shook with inward sobs.

'Not to hurt her,' he said, deeply troubled, 'but to save myself.'

'You did not give me credit for any human feeling,' she went on presently, lifting her head, but not looking at him. 'Did you think me such an unnatural monster that I could bear to know myself the cause of a man killing himself and not die almost myself with shame, and horror, and remorse? You don't know how I suffered. Oh! you don't know how I suffered.'

'I can believe it—now.'

'If you had answered my letter—if you had come to see me just once again—I would have told you.' She spoke very low, and her words fell brokenly. 'It was you who opened my eyes—at Felmarshes. You made me want to be good; to strive after the highest—affection. It wasn't that kind of feeling he had for me. He let himself go mad, I think. One idea possessed him. He was the sort of strong man who, when he gives way, does so utterly—allows himself to be absorbed, overwhelmed by one desire. And when he can't gratify it—don't you understand? How could I foresee that he would want—*that?* He would have had me give up everything for him altogether. He would not believe that I had never cared for him—in that way. No; never, never for one instant. Then I got reckless, too, and I told him just how it had been—and my badness, and how I had purposely led him on. And then how, knowing you had made me realize—I said that I would do all I could to blot the remembrance of him out of my life. Then he said—things about you. He—it

drove him mad. He said he would kill you —or himself. And the next I heard was, that he was dead. And I tried to make you know—and you would not——'

'Ah!' Blanchard cried, 'I understand. There was something that was always a mystery—something between him and me—the night he shot himself. I know now.'

Gladys got up and stood before him.

'I have told you. And I have nothing more to say. I came all the way to say this —all the way to Australia. Try not—not to think—so hardly.'

Her words seemed to melt into a sob. She turned swiftly, and was some paces from him before he spoke.

'Gladys!' he called; but she would not turn back, and he saw her white form vanishing like a ghost behind the orange-trees.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FIRE.

Tregaskiss was sleeping the heavy sleep of the inebriate. He had finished up the evening, without the restraining influence of ladies' society, in the Bachelors' Quarters, had come late to his room, and had thrown himself only half undressed on the bed, outside the coverlet, beside his sleeping wife. The long journey in the heat, and physical fatigue, had made Clare drowsy. When she awoke towards the small hours, it was to the sound of the baby's wail and to that of her husband's stertorous and fume-laden breathing. She had been dreaming a most poetic and tender dream, in which she and Geneste were wandering together by the banks of a broad blue lake, which she imagined to be

Lake Eungella, with heavenly moonlight streaming down upon the waters and a gentle wind ruffling its surface into tiny waves, which threw back opaline rays from their crests of foam. It was some moments before she could convince herself which was dream, which reality. She drew the baby to her side, hushed and fed it from the bottle placed in readiness, and presently it went to sleep again.

The night was very warm; she was drowsy still, but the inert form beside her brought nightmare thoughts. Her observations of the evening evoked suggestions of possible freedom at which she recoiled, and which mercifully were only suggestions, never taking the form of definite desire. How could she wish for that which, while both lived, was only to be gained through wrong-doing? The ghastly doubt presented itself: Was it in truth sin to obey Nature's ordinance whether in the higher or lower scale of being—the ordinance that bade the birds of the air choose their mates, and till the offspring were fledged at least be faithful to them? Their offspring! Here lay the

human responsibility. Clare touched the little soft sleeping thing beside her, and wondered at the curious, impersonal sort of feeling she had for it, and wondered, too, if she would have felt differently had it been the child of the man she loved.

She got up and put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and then lay down on the sofa before the open window, gazing into the velvety gloom. The sky was very dark. Clouds—those ineffectual storm-clouds—had obscured the stars, and the darkness seemed full of curious noises, rustlings — stealthy creepings, insect murmurings, distant cries of curlews and native dogs—sounds that only intensified the loneliness of the summer night. Those same thoughts which had visited Clare as she had lain awake at Cedar Hill waiting for her husband's coming came to her now. In her mind's eye she seemed again to see written in everything Nature's law of dual oneness, and, in horrid mockery of the eternal pattern, modern man's law of marriage, the copy and the antithesis of it. Why should it be a necessity of evolution, the antagonism between Nature and man?

What was the good of revelation and theology and the so-called higher progress if it only brought about this fundamental discord, upsetting the whole order and balance of the social universe, which had need but be in harmony with Nature for the worst kind of pain to be done away with? What was the meaning, what was the purpose of so much useless suffering? Did the generality of people suffer in the same manner? or was it that there were certain temperaments originally planned in harmony with the great cosmic chords, to whom dissonance was sheer spiritual agony?

Clare Tregaskiss' poor tormented soul, torn with love and longing, and the upbraidings of conscience, groped helplessly in a maze of those mysteries which, from the beginning of all history, have been left unsolved. Had she realized that the capacity to feel such pain, susceptibility to such discord, are the first dawnings on the soul of a higher existence, it is doubtful whether she would have been greatly consoled. For the doctrine that to love most is to suffer keenest, and that to suffer most keenly is to be

liberated soonest from the thrall of fleshly affections, does not appeal to the poor human in his first stage of regeneration. The thrall is dear, the throb of the passion is sweet, and love the divine has its feet on earth though its head be in heaven. The conflict between soul and sense has ever furnished forth the battle-ground in which saints have been worsted and heroes overcome, and the cup of renunciation, offered though it be by ministering angels, has always been the most unwelcome to the thirsty heart.

Clare did not know how long she stayed on the sofa; she must have fallen asleep, or, if not, have fancied she had done so while her eyes drooped, for when she looked out again the night showed a feeble glow—a glimmer touching the near trees that made her think it must be close on sunrise. The glow deepened more quickly and less steadily than that of daybreak; the shiny leaves of the orange-trees seemed to quiver in it, and the tall feathers of the bamboos to stand out illuminated as in a transformation scene. Then Clare became alive to a curious faint roaring as of wind rushing afar. Could it be

a cyclone?—one hears them from a long way off. But there was not that strange brooding or the feeling as of a world's breath drawn inward which heralds such a storm. But yet she fancied it had grown hotter, and she fancied, too, that she smelt smoke like that of burning twigs.

Suddenly there was a startled clang; the big bell of the Workings crashed through the stillness of night. Then came shouts, at first indistinct, from a distance, then caught up nearer, and now sounding close in the garden and veranda.

'Fire! Fire! The house is on fire!'

Mrs. Tregaskiss darted from the sofa to the open French windows and looked out.

White figures were already rushing from the house; a tongue of flame leaped through the casement of a room at the end of the wing just beyond her own; she could hear the crackling and sputtering of the woodwork. There were frantic calls coming from different directions. Mr. Cusack, in pyjamas, ran down the veranda calling wildly for 'Men!' 'Where are the men?' 'Somebody go and call up the men!'

Presently came the tramp of the Specials and of the gentlemen who slept at the Bachelors' Quarters, the house being given up to the Cusack family and their married and lady visitors.

Clare ran back to her room and seized the baby from its cot. Tregaskiss slept on. She shook the inert form and called to him :

'Keith, get up! Keith, the house is on fire!'

But to no purpose. Then, as she was seizing the caraffe of water to pour upon him, a hand interposed, and Geneste's voice said collectedly :

'I will get him up. Don't be frightened. You've got the baby? Just collect some of your things ; the fire has started close here. There's no danger at all, but I want to get you quietly to the garden. Where is Ning?'

'Ning?'

Clare had almost forgotten the child, who had been put with Gladys in a room in the main body of the house. She ran along the veranda, the infant in her arms, meeting, as she went, white-clad figures with terrified faces, too intent upon themselves to take

any notice of her. Mrs. Cusack, keeping her self-possession, was directing the removal of furniture, and with her own hands dragged out heavy cabinets and chests of drawers. Helen, very pale, young Gillespie helping her, passed in and out with bundles of books, pictures and clothes. Miss Lawford, shrieking hysterically, rushed hither and thither, till Mrs. Cusack sternly bade her not to make a fool of herself, but give a hand in the work.

Mr. Cusack, losing his head, like most cowards, roared contradictory orders to the band of men engaged in handing up buckets of water, and plying the hose laid from the lagoon, to which the Brinda Plains garden owed its beauty. Clare gave quick glances at each group and person, but there was no Gladys, no sign of Ning. Her heart began to grow sick for the child. Just then a shower of sparks rose from the back-roof of the main buildings, showing that the fire must have broken out in two places.

'Oh, Mrs. Tregaskiss, it's awful!' ejaculated the mistress, scarcely pausing in her labour. 'Those dreadful Unionists! Ning?

—she's with Mrs. Hilditch—the spare room at the end.'

Clare's speed quickened at the information. The fire was gaining at the very spot Mrs. Cusack, with a hurried jerk of her head, indicated. Clare turned an agonized face as she ran.

'They are nowhere about. They must be in there. Oh! won't someone come and help me?' she cried.

Steps responded to her call. Blanchard, who had been in the string of Specials with buckets, broke away at sight of Mrs. Cusack's gesture. He looked very white and determined, and all the time that he had been passing buckets his eyes were watching for Gladys, and he could not have waited a moment longer without assuring himself that she was in safety. He snatched up an opossum rug.

'I know the room,' he said. 'I'm coming.'

'She always locks her door!' Clare panted. 'Gladys!—you must break it in! Oh, make haste!—my Ning!'

'Put the baby down!' cried Blanchard, pressing forward. 'You may want your

hands. But don't come in unless I call. They are safe, Mrs. Tregaskiss; the fire hasn't got there yet. Gladys will be safe.'

He said the last words defiantly, as though he took to himself in that moment the right in all that concerned Gladys, and wished to announce it to the whole world. Nevertheless, smoke was coming out of the crevices of the French window, closed tightly. Gladys had a foolish terror of the wide-open doors and windows of the Bush. She was not afraid of burglars or black-fellows, but of snakes, and so she always shut everything that gave on the ground. Blanchard dashed himself against the window. There was a shivering of glass, a shattering of woodwork, and a little figure, in a white nightgown, holding a black doll to its breast, darted out of the smoke and clutched at Clare's skirt.

'Oh, Mummy, mine plenty frightened! Mine think it Debil-debil come along big fire. Mine call out plenty loud. Ba'al any good. Gladys altogether asleep.'

Clare gathered the small creature to her bosom. 'Oh, Ning, my Ning!' she cried,

half sobbing. The mother-instinct, roused to a fierceness which she could hardly have believed possible, vindicated Nature in having made her woman. She felt an agony of tenderness and of remorse for the black thoughts which had haunted her morbid hours.

The emotion so filled her that, with Ning in her arms, she forgot for an instant that Gladys was in danger.

Only for an instant. She put the child away, bidding her take care of baby over there on the grass, and leaped into the stifling smoke, to be confronted by Blanchard bearing Gladys' inanimate form, from which the opossum rug trailed.

'Go back!' he said; 'it's all right, but the curtains were catching. She is not burned, but she must have air—and water, from somewhere.'

Clare flew again. When she came back with water from one of the bedrooms, Geneste had joined her. Tregaskiss behind him, wakened and sobered into complete possession of his senses, was calling frantically, 'Pickaninny! Pickaninny! Where's

Daddy's Pickaninny?' and, at sight of her, 'Oh, thank God, she's all right!'

He carried off Ning, lifting up the baby also, which was crowing with glee at the sight of the flames. Clare saw him with the children moving away, all three rejoicing, and a sudden revulsion of feeling seized her —a terrified sense of incongruity and unnaturalness and an immense desolation. She stood, as it were, the outcast, thrust out by her wrongful love from the family bond, her maternal impulse recoiling upon herself and reacting in passionate revolt from ties which divided her very being against itself. And here by her side was the man she loved, gazing at her with a fervid yearning which would no longer be kept within the restraints she had imposed. All her resolve, all her heroism of reserve, melted and vanished in the wild confusion of advancing flames and of the alarm and excitement that surrounded them. The two seemed to stand alone, their world unharmed, while the conventional world was being destroyed before their eyes.

A rafter fell, scattering fragments almost

at their feet. He flung his arms about her and half dragged, half carried, her across the tennis-ground to a vine trellis some little distance off. Just then the bell at the Workings again clanged out; there were hoarse shouts, another shaft of light shooting up down below the lagoon, and a cry, repeated among the Specials at the pumps, 'The wool-shed! The wool-shed! By —— that's fired too!'

Clare clung to Geneste, trembling and sobbing, physically unnerved. She began to shiver, though the air was like the blast of a furnace, and he held her close, soothing her and warming her with his kisses.

'My dear—my darling! My poor, poor Clare!'

CHAPTER XXII.

'WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.'

It was a strange scene upon which the sun rose on the morning after the fire. The house was a wreck, the garden down-trampled and strewn with furniture, piles of bedding, and all kinds of miscellaneous properties. Nothing remained of the wool-shed but a blackened patch of ground and some heaps of ashes and charred timbers. Fortunately, the night had been very still, and the buildings fairly isolated, so that the flames had not spread. Grimy and exhausted, the men dispersed at last to bathe in the water-hole and change their singed garments. The ladies had gone in the very early hours to the storekeeper's and overseer's cottages, where they lay down on sofas

and spare beds, and by-and-by dressed and had some tea. Later on, though it was early still, when they were again in the garden of the house—now no more—sorting out their respective belongings, Helen Cusack was interrupted by Geneste.

'I wanted to propose a plan to you,' he said. 'I have been talking about it to Mrs. Tregaskiss. Why should you not all come with me to my place to-day and rest there, while your father and brothers see after things here, and the Unionist scare goes over a bit? Even if Mrs. Cusack wanted to remain—and she says she must be on the spot—why should not you come along with the Tregaskisses and Mrs. Hilditch?'

'No, no!' she exclaimed abruptly. 'I should prefer to stay with my mother.'

'You have often promised to come,' he urged; 'and you can do no good here. This seems a very good opportunity. It would be such a pleasure to have you for my visitor.'

'No; I should hate it,' she said in the same jerky tone. 'Please don't ask me.'

He desisted from persuasion, and silently

watched her as she gathered some books together and tied them into a bundle. But when she tried to lift the bundle, her hands trembled so that the books fell and were scattered. He picked them up and took the bundle from her, and as she thanked him she lifted her face for the first time. She looked so worn and upset that he was genuinely concerned. He insisted upon her drinking some port wine which Mrs. Cusack had given him to administer to the ladies, and then, upon taking her out of the steamy heat, leading her to that very vine trellis which had been the scene of his own and Clare's fall from their stronghold of reserve.

Helen shrank visibly, pausing at the entrance.

'Oh no, not there!' she said.

He noticed her shrinking and a slight shudder with which she turned away—noticed also that she reddened painfully when she spoke to him, and that she avoided meeting his eyes as though there were some disagreeable consciousness in her mind relating to him. Her manner had been a little strange of late, distant and embarrassed; and

this, the evening before, had been particularly noticeable. A thought flashed across him: Was it possible that she had witnessed that reckless exhibition of feeling in the arbour? If so, it was not surprising that her maidenly instinct of propriety should have been outraged—as well as something dearer still.

'Why do you not want to go in there?' he asked.

She did not answer, but moved to another creeper-covered summer-house, overlooking the tennis-court—a spot where they often had afternoon tea.

'Why? Why?' he persisted.

'I don't know. I can't tell you. I wasn't thinking of what I was doing.' Her voice was so full of trouble, her confusion and repugnance so evident, that his suspicion was confirmed. 'Please don't trouble about me,' she went on. 'Please go back and look after the others.'

'Not till I have cleared up something with you first. I think I know what you were thinking, Helen,' he said gently. 'We have been such good friends, and we decided—

didn't we?—that we were to be always friends, yet you seem to me to have avoided speaking to me, as if you disapproved of me, these last few times that we have met; and now your manner makes me fancy somehow that I have done something quite lately to lower me still more in your esteem. Tell me frankly if this is so.'

'Yes,' she answered boldly, her face crimsoning again, and then getting very pale. Presently she cried impetuously: 'It's because we have been such friends. Only—it is not a thing for me to speak about. But I can't see and hear things—though it's without intention—and not—not——'

'I understand,' he interrupted quietly. 'Last night I was betrayed into the expression of—a feeling which I—to which I had been forbidden to give utterance. And you became aware of that feeling.'

'Forbidden!' she exclaimed.

'Mine was the fault entirely—from the very first. She is the very best, truest, most loyal woman. She has been sorely tried. Do you not believe this?'

'Of course I believe that she is good. I

am very sorry for her. But it is so terrible to—to love a woman who is married.'

'Yes,' he assented sadly. 'It is very terrible, especially when the woman's marriage is an unfortunate one, for then it is so hard for the man who loves her to keep silent. I am to blame. I ought to have obeyed her solemn command. But—the circumstances, the fire, the confusion, are my excuse. A man's emotions are not always under his control.' Helen's lip curled slightly. 'Yes, I know what you are thinking of. If it had not been—— But I have no excuse. You are quite right. But, oh! Helen, do you remember something you said to me that first night Mrs. Tregaskiss and I were here together?'

'I remember several things. But there is no use in our reminding each other of that night.'

'I want to remind you of one thing in particular, however. Please let me. You asked me then to promise you that I would tell you if ever there should be a Guinevere. And you said — I have thought of your words many times; dear Helen, dear sister

Helen, who is only less dear to me than one woman in the world—you said that in such a case you could only pray for us. Pray for us, then, Helen; pray for her—that somehow good may come into her life and make it less bitter. The prayer of a pure, true woman for another woman who needs comfort should be a force in the spiritual region of things.'

The vibration of deep feeling in his voice moved her intensely, and in a strange and sudden way changed her moral attitude towards him.

A moment before she had despised him. And in truth, after all, he was only a sorry hero. Helen was clear-sighted, in spite of the romantic infatuation with which Geneste had inspired her. At this moment there seemed to her almost bathos in his want of self-control. But women have a knack of loving just the men who, under certain emotional conditions, prove themselves to be but poor creatures. They have a grand knack, too, of reconstructing their ideal in accordance with masculine weakness and perversity.

She looked straight into his eyes; it was her tribute to his sincerity, and to a certain right of intention in which she intended to believe. So he interpreted the look, at any rate.

'Thank you,' he said humbly.

'What do you wish me to pray for?' she asked. 'What can I pray for that would be for her good, unless it be that you may leave her, and that she may be delivered from an affection that is wrong?'

'Have you no faith in a loyal love friendship? Do you not trust me?'

'Oh, I don't know! How can I tell? Yes, I trust you. I don't feel as I did a little while ago; it was so dreadful thinking it over alone and all in the dark. But how can I tell? Dr. Geneste, you ask too hard things of me.'

'I will ask of you nothing, then, except only that you will try as much as you can to believe in me. I don't ask you to believe in her. It would be impossible for you not to do so. She has all nobleness written on her face. I have respected her wishes—her sense of duty to her children, to her husband—and

have done my best to refrain from expression of a feeling that has grown in spite of myself. But sometimes it is difficult. Last night, in the alarm, and in her natural agitation, I lost command of myself. But that will never occur again. And why should I leave her if I am strong enough not to offend? None could blame me for trying to give her such help as I may in her most unhappy life, such sympathy as will make her feel her loneliness less keenly. Believe that I honour and care for her too much to wish anything except what is best for her.'

He was conscious himself that the words were evasive of the issue, though he meant them honestly enough. She accepted them as a young, noble-minded girl naturally would accept such an assurance, and put out her hand with a gesture at once of appeal and confidence.

'Yes, I will believe that. And I will pray for you, Dr. Geneste—though I am not good nor religious, that my prayers should avail anything. Now I have told you, I will try and put out of my head what I saw last night and at first felt about it. It was the shock,

and something—something Miss Lawford once said. I am ashamed of myself for having felt as I did.'

'Thank you,' he said again, but he did not look at her.

'I want to say something to you,' Helen went on in a hurried manner. 'I don't wonder at your caring for her. How could you help it? She is far above everybody; so different from the others—so different from me.' Helen gave a pathetic little smile. 'It was just that at first it was a shock—now I understand. I crept away and cried—and cried. For the moment it was like having one's faith shattered into pieces. And I thought of how you had once—once—kissed me.' Helen's voice dropped as though she were touching upon something sacred, and then there came a passionate little outburst. 'Dr. Geneste, you oughtn't to have done that then. You ought to have remembered that I was not a child any longer, and that I might mistake——'

She broke off, blushing deeply.

'I know that I ought not to have done it,' he answered. 'If you could but realize how

the remembrance distresses and humiliates me—how unworthy I have felt myself of your goodness to me since! You remember what we talked of—how that closest of all feelings can exist at its best only between a man and woman nearer each other in age than you and I. You will have quite a different feeling, believe me, dear Helen, when your right life-companion comes along. And yet I can't help hoping and thinking that—that though you may have the greatest affection for someone else, you will not have a less affection for me. That will prove the truth of what I now say.'

'I shall never at any time have a less affection for you,' she answered steadily; 'but I shall never at any time have a greater affection for any other man. Dr. Geneste, I don't know why I shouldn't speak out—especially now, though I dare say it would seem dreadful to many people, and they would be horrified at my boldness. I can't help it, I don't seem able to feel about what is true and real—as real as myself—in the sort of way that is described in books, and that girls are generally supposed to feel. I

think it is poor and petty to be always guarding one's self and pretending. I *want* you to know that you will always be the first in the world to me; and if the day should ever come in which you were to say to me, "Helen, I don't love you as I have loved another woman whom I can't marry, but you can be of use to me as my little sister, my companion, my servant. Will you be either of these to me, and give up your life for that and teach me to forget?" Well——' She made a movement full of womanly sweetness and pride, and her whole face glowed. 'I should answer that I would ask no greater happiness than to devote my life to being of service to you.'

As he looked at her in all her girlish prettiness, he felt that fate had been lavish in love to him, and that, were there no Clare Tregaskiss, he might well be content to take the worship of this fine, trusting creature, and devote the rest of his life to making her happy.

'Who knows, Helen,' he almost groaned —'who knows that there may not come such a day? And then I shall remind

you of your words, and claim their fulfilment.'

'Well, we understand each other,' she answered humbly. 'I am not afraid because I've put myself in the wrong position, and made myself into a sort of doormat for you to walk upon. I suppose that's my only way of caring, though it may be rather a contemptible one.'

'My dear,' he cried, 'it's a sublime way of caring; and that's just what makes me know that you'll care differently some day.'

'Oh, well, we won't argue about that; it does not matter. There's only one thing I would not do for you, and that is something that I knew to be wrong. No, I'm not a bit ashamed of myself; it's all quite beyond that kind of consideration. And, then, I know you understand. No one but you could understand—and Mrs. Tregaskiss; I dare say she would know how I feel.'

'Yes, she would know.'

'You may tell her, if you please, all that I have said to you. I shouldn't mind; it might make her more—perhaps more contented with her lot. Sometimes I think that I shall

tell her myself, but she always seems so far away and so cold.'

'She is not cold. She is only unhappy.'

'I know that. Dr. Geneste, tell me, did you have a longing to tear off that still, smooth marble covering, and get at the real woman who was bleeding underneath? Was it that which made you care?'

'Yes,' he answered in a low voice. 'And last night I did see the bleeding woman, and my heart ached for her, and I wanted to comfort her. Now do you understand?'

'Yes, I understand.'

Then he laughed outright. There was to him a touch of comicality in his position between these two women, who were both of them, he acknowledged to himself, in their strength so immeasurably above him. And Helen's generosity, her splendid candour, seemed to turn the situation into a sort of sublime farce.

'Will you come over to Darra?' he asked abruptly. 'Don't, if you would rather not. But I don't see why you shouldn't, and it would prove at least that you believed in me.'

Helen showed that she was human, in that she winced again at the suggestion.

'I don't know; there's so much to do here. We'll see what Mother says.'

Young Gillespie came upon the scene. He was almost turning back at the sight of Dr. Geneste with Helen, but changed his mind.

'Miss Cusack, I've been hunting for you. They want you to come and choose your room in the Bachelors' Quarters. I've fixed up the books and pictures and things in the room I've been having myself. I think you will like it. There's a window looking on the garden.'

'Poor you!' said Helen, smiling bravely. 'And where are you going?'

'Oh, to the overseer's—no, Geneste has asked me to camp at Darra for a bit, and I've accepted the invitation.'

'It seems to me that we are all going to camp at Darra,' said Helen.

'Miss Lawford and Minnie are going, anyhow,' said Gillespie. 'I heard it settled with Mrs. Cusack. I'm to drive them over this afternoon; and Tregaskiss wants to start

at the same time, so as to get the cool of the evening. He's in an awful fume about his buggy-horses doing two long stages running. He says going by the Carmodys' will make too great a round.'

Geneste had suggested a slight détour by way of the Carmodys', so that Clare might pay the visit they had spoken about, and he himself have an opportunity of quietly noting how poor Mrs. Carmody was getting on.

'Oh, it will be all right. I will go and talk to him about it,' said Geneste.

They walked to what had once been the back entrance, where Tregaskiss' buggy was standing, and he himself worrying among the saddle-bags, Gladys' portmanteau, salvage from the fire, and the other miscellaneous packages.

'The poor brutes will be regularly cooked if I make that round,' he was saying. 'I've sent Shand back to Mount Wombo, and shall have to drive the buggy myself; and I'm pretty considerably heavier than Shand. I don't know how I'm going to manage all these things, and Clare and the children and the half-caste into the bargain.'

'You need not take such a load,' said Geneste quietly. 'I've got a spare pack-horse, and my black-boy can drive it with some of your things. Mrs. Hilditch is riding, and I don't see at all why, if Mrs. Tregaskiss liked, we shouldn't carry out part of the original plan, anyhow, and we riders go round by the Carmodys'. If we start pretty soon, we shall get there for a late breakfast. I'm particularly anxious to see Mrs. Carmody. I hear she is not so well; and I know she wants to meet your wife, who might be a comfort to her. If we settle it so, you needn't set off till the afternoon, when the rest go from here.'

The plan suited Tregaskiss very well. He could thus put some of his own baggage in the Brinda Plains buggy and save his horses, and, moreover, he would have the opportunity of driving Miss Lawford. He assented eagerly. But when Geneste approached Mrs. Hilditch with the proposal, she declined.

'Three is a bad number; and I don't know Mrs. Carmody, and if she is sick she won't want to know me. No; I think I'll

let you have Clare to yourself, Dr. Geneste, and I'll wait till the afternoon.'

Gladys was not herself. She looked quite worn out; there were two red spots on her cheeks, though otherwise she was very pale, and her eyes had an alert, anxious expression. She was wondering what had become of Blanchard, whom she had not seen since his deliverance of her from the burning room. A sudden shyness kept her from asking about him, and she waited on in the hope that he might appear towards the afternoon.

Thus it happened that about nine that morning Mrs. Tregaskiss and Geneste found themselves riding alone to the Carmodys' station.

An odd little incident had happened just before their start. Clare was in the spare room at the overseer's, putting on her habit, when a knock sounded at the door, and Helen Cusack asked if she might come in.

'Certainly,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss.

'Mother asked if you would mind taking charge of these,' Helen said awkwardly, producing a small packet. 'It's some Iceland

moss, and there's a bottle of Mr. Gillespie's tasteless cod-liver oil. He doesn't need them now, and mother thought they might help Mrs. Carmody, if you don't mind.'

'Why, of course not. I can easily manage a bigger parcel; there are dees for a valise on the off-side of my saddle.'

'I think that's all,' said Helen.

Clare put on her hat and arranged her veil.

'It seems strange,' said Helen deliberately, but with a break in her voice, 'that we should all be going over to stay with Dr. Geneste.'

'Yes.' The woman's hand trembled as she put the pin in her veil. 'You are going, then?'

'He asked me. Mother thinks I'd better, as Miss Lawford is to be there. He says she can teach the children just the same, and there's not a quiet place here. He doesn't want us to come back till they have settled in the Bachelors' Quarters. Mother will have a lot to do.'

'It is a good plan,' said Clare. 'I wish I could persuade you to come on to Mount

Wombo with us; it wouldn't be quite so dull now that we have Mrs. Hilditch.'

'I shouldn't mind how dull it was. I'd like to come.'

'Then come, my dear,' said Mrs. Tregaskiss, turning round to her from the glass.

She was surprised at the expression upon the girl's face; it seemed to her an accusation against herself of disloyalty.

'Helen!' she exclaimed, dropping the gloves and whip she had taken from the table.

'Mrs. Tregaskiss,' Helen said hurriedly, 'I want to tell you something I feel mean not to tell you; but I don't see how I can, somehow. Dr. Geneste knows. Will you ask him to tell you what we were talking about this morning?'

Clare stood silent for a minute before answering, her brown eyes searching the girl's face.

'Do you think I had better ask him?' she said slowly. 'There are many things which it is far wiser to leave unsaid; and' she added, 'there are things which it is difficult for a very young girl, with her limited know-

ledge, to judge justly. We learn as we grow older, and suffer more, that silence is generally the truest sympathy.'

'You must do as you please,' answered Helen in a choked tone, and hurried from the room.

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